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ABSTRACT

Although online consumer-generated media (CGM) play an important role in travel decision-making, it is questionable if the uses and impacts of CGM are equal across different age groups. This study thus tested whether generational differences can be found regarding travel-related CGM use and impacts. The results show important differences among the generational groups in terms of their Internet affinity, travel-related CGM use and perceptions as well as their CGM creation behaviors. The findings of this study broaden our understanding of how travel-related CGM is used and perceived by different generational cohorts and indicate the need for strategic marketing planning that takes generational cohorts into account.

INTRODUCTION

Online word-of-mouth in the form of consumer-generated media (CGM) plays an important role in the context of travel decision-making (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008) with a large percentage of consumers consulting CGM in the course of planning trips (eMarketer, 2008a). CGM is seen as an especially influential form of travel information as it is based on actual experiences of similar others who do not have commercial interests (Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts, 2007; Litvin et al., 2008). Indeed, online reviews, a form of CGM, have been found to influence a variety of travel-related decisions (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). The question is whether use and impacts are equal across different traveler groups. Rogers (1995) suggests that younger individuals are more likely to adopt emerging technologies and, indeed, recent reports indicate that CGM use is particularly prominent among young individuals (eMarketer, 2008b; Lenhart et al., 2007). Yet existing cohort analyses regarding general Internet use for travel planning have not provided clear results (Beldona, 2005; Han & Oh, 2006) and a report by PhoCusWright (2008) suggests that technology use for travel planning is age-independent. Thus, a study was conducted to test whether generational differences can be found regarding travel-related CGM use and impacts.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A number of recent studies have confirmed the important role of online CGM for travelers' trip planning and decision-making (Litvin et al. 2008; Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts, 2007; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008; Yoo et al., 2007; Gretzel et al., 2009). According to eMarketer (2008a), 82 percent of US online consumers have checked online reviews, blogs and other online forms of feedback for their travel-related purchasing decisions.

More than 5 million travelers regularly visit Virtualtourist.com to search for travel reviews and tips (Lee & Gretzel, 2006) and about 20 million people visit Tripadvisor to utilize other travelers' 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). In general, travelers seem to have high levels of trust in CGM (Yoo et al., 2009).

However, previous studies noted demographic influences on information search and technology use (Shimp & Beardon, 1982; Rogers, 1995; Dabholkar, 1996). For instance, Pitkow and Kehoe (1996) argued that demographic factors such as race, education and occupations are significant factors influencing Internet use behaviors. Similarly, Bonn, Furr and Susskind (1998) found significant influences of age, education, and level of Internet use on pleasure travelers' online information search behaviors. Beldona (2005) argued that people in the same generational cohort share a similar set of experiences and, thus, show similar consumption patterns. Specifically, he found influences of age cohort membership on online information search behaviors. While these studies indicate that demographic factors impact people's general information search behaviors, it is not clear whether traveler's generational cohorts also influence travel-related CGM use and perceived impacts. It is necessary to examine how online CGM is used and perceived among the different age groups. Consequently, the study presented in this paper investigated the perceptions, use and impacts of CGM in different generational groups to better inform current travel-related CGM research as well as to provide practical implications to practitioners.

RESEARCH METHODS

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. A total of 3109 panelists responded to the survey invitation but only 2671 indicated they were active Internet users. Further, of those Internet users, 1682 had traveled for pleasure within 12 months prior to the study. These online travelers form the actual sample for the study. The online travelers in the sample were somewhat more female (56.3%), mostly married/living with a partner (63.5%), employed full time (48.5%), highly educated (53.9% have a college degree), living without children (67.1%), wealthy (59.7% have household incomes of $50,000 or more) and predominantly white (82.3%). Also, 73% had used the Internet for their pleasure travel planning. This percentage is very similar to the 76.4% reported in the latest TIA report on Internet use for travel (TIA, 2008), giving the results external validity.

Respondents were classified as belonging to a certain generation based on the age category they selected. Only individuals of 18 years or older were allowed to take the survey; thus, younger members of Generation Y were not captured by this study. Generation Y was defined as 18-24 years (10.5% of online travelers in the sample), Generation X as 25-44 years (36.2%), Boomers as 45-64 years (34.1%) and Seniors as 65 or older (19.1%). Differences among these generational groups were measured using Chi Square tests.

FINDINGS

The results show important differences among the generational groups in terms of their internet affinity, use and perceptions of travel-related CGM as well as CGM creation behaviors.

First, the age cohorts differ in their Internet affinity in that Gen Y members perceive themselves more as advanced and expert users and also engage more in general CGM use when online. Watching videos, looking at photos posted by others and reading reviews are almost ubiquitous behaviors for this generation (Table 1). While some seniors engage in general CGM use and creation, the number of members in this cohort who exhibit these behaviors is significantly smaller than in other groups.

Table 1. Generational Differences in General Internet Affinity

General Internet Use	Gen. Y (%)	Gen. X (%)	Boomer (%)	Senior (%)	χ^2 ***p<.01
Internet Skills					154.6***
Novice	2.7	4.1	5.2	9.3	
Intermediate User	11.5	29.0	44.6	55.4	
Advanced User	57.4	44.3	38.8	31.6	
Expert	28.4	22.5	11.5	3.7	
Online Activities					
Read blogs	85.8	66.7	47.9	34.9	138.2***
Write a blog	56.1	33.1	13.3	8.2	173.6***
Post comments to a blog	65.5	43.9	25.2	15.2	145.9***
Use a social networking site	88.5	57.3	27.1	11.2	330.2***
Listen to or download audio podcasts	75.7	54.7	32.1	16.4	194.9***
Watch or download videos	91.2	76.7	59.2	41.3	149.8***
Post/share audio files	59.5	36.5	15.0	10.0	178.6***
Post/share videos	60.8	38.4	18.3	13.8	151.0***
Look at photos posted by others	91.9	80.4	70.4	66.9	45.7***
Post/share photos	84.5	64.1	46.3	43.1	99.0***
Read reviews posted by other consumers	91.2	82.0	73.5	57.6	78.6***
Rate products/contents or post reviews	75.0	63.7	55.0	36.8	74.4***
Read wiki entries	69.6	46.3	23.8	11.9	197.4***
Contribute to a wiki	43.9	24.3	7.7	3.3	162.4***

Table 2. Differences in Travel-related CGM Use

Travel-related CGM Use	Gen. Y (%)	Gen. X (%)	Boomer (%)	Senior (%)	χ^2 ** p<.05 ***p<.01
Use of CGM for the most recent overnight pleasure trip planning					77.3***
Yes	77.3	56.6	44.3	29.0	
Types of CGM used for the most recent overnight pleasure trip					
Travel reviews	82.4	83.6	78.9	73.3	3.2
Photos	69.6	58.2	38.8	24.4	40.2***
Videos	20.6	16.0	7.9	13.3	8.9**
Blogs	32.4	24.4	14.5	15.6	13.1***
Comments on blogs	38.2	23.9	19.1	20.0	13.1***
Postings in discussion forums	25.5	22.1	25.0	22.2	0.7
Top 3 websites used to find CGM					
Yahoo Travel	55.9	44.1	41.1	16.3	19.7***
Online Travel agency (e.g. Expedia)	34.3	31.0	39.1	58.1	12.1***
TripAdvisor	22.5	37.6	24.5	20.9	12.4***

Further, clear differences exist with respect to CGM use in the context of travel (Table 2). While a large majority of Gen Y travelers use CGM for planning pleasure travel (77.3%), less than a third of Senior travelers do. Of those who use CGM for travel planning, most take advantage of reviews, regardless of the generation to which they belong. Generational differences were also not found for postings in discussion forums, a medium that has existed for quite some time. Yet, regarding the use of other forms of CGM, generational differences are apparent, especially as far as photos are concerned. In addition, the type of Website on which travelers look for CGM differs by age cohort. Interestingly, younger travelers are more likely to turn to Yahoo Travel for contents while older travelers prefer online travel agencies. The online review community TripAdvisor is especially popular among Gen X travelers.

Table 2. Differences in Perceived Impacts and Benefits of Travel-Related CGM

Travel-related CGM Impacts	Gen. Y (%)	Gen. X (%)	Boomer (%)	Senior (%)	χ^2 **p<.05 ***p<.01
Influence of CGM on travel decisions					
Where you went	26.5	20.8	20.8	17.1	15.6**
How you traveled to the destination	22.0	16.9	14.9	20.5	33.5***
When you traveled	28.0	19.0	17.1	20.5	32.4***
What you did	35.0	27.1	19.7	13.3	25.6***
Where you stayed overnight	39.6	41.1	31.1	25.0	23.4***
Where you ate	30.7	25.2	16.6	14.0	31.9***
Where you shopped	28.0	22.9	14.2	7.1	27.4***
Impacts of CGM use on travel planning					
Number of places considered to visit	37.9	29.9	20.3	15.9	38.1***
Number of places actually visited	28.8	26.5	16.6	15.9	20.6***
Amount of money spent on travel	31.1	24.6	14.0	21.0	28.4***
Amount of time spent on advance planning	40.2	35.2	25.3	21.7	35.4***
Number of info. sources used for planning	45.5	43.4	31.4	23.6	35.8***
Use of ads in TV, radio or press for ideas	28.8	18.3	10.8	11.5	32.3***
Stops at visitor info. centers at destination	22.7	19.8	19.8	18.5	12.3**
Likelihood of buying guidebooks/maps	31.1	19.6	16.3	15.9	21.1***
Number of travel brochures ordered	25.0	19.8	13.4	10.8	24.2***
Amount of info.(print-outs)taken on trips	35.6	31.7	25.0	19.7	20.9***
Benefits of CGM use for travel planning					
Can find more info. about a destination	72.0	72.2	68.3	57.3	19.5***
Can get more involved in planning my trip	60.6	59.8	53.2	47.8	22.7***
Can better evaluate where to go/what to do	67.9	69.8	68.6	52.9	35.7***
Can better imagine the destination	66.7	69.0	67.2	54.1	35.4***
Can save time planning my trip	55.3	55.0	48.5	41.4	18.9***
I am more confident that my trip will be successful	59.8	57.9	49.1	33.8	56.9***
I get a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction	43.2	49.7	40.4	34.4	20.7***
Can more easily share the info. I find	47.0	51.9	43.9	34.4	24.2***
Have a clearer idea of what to expect from the trip	66.7	65.6	63.7	54.8	28.9***
Can get better value for my money	56.1	56.6	51.2	41.4	22.1***
Do not have to waste time looking for info. During the trip/at the destination	56.8	54.0	52.3	43.3	13.4**

Those who use CGM for travel were also asked a series of questions regarding the impact of their CGM use on their travel decision-making and planning. In general, CGM use has the greatest influence on accommodation decisions and increases the amount of time spent planning and the number of information sources considered. Being able to find out more about a destination is seen as the greatest benefit of CGM. These impacts and perceived benefits are significantly greater for Gen Y travelers (Table 3).

Table 4. Differences in Perceptions of Travel-related CGM

Perceptions of Travel-related CGM	Gen. Y (%)	Gen. X (%)	Boomer (%)	Senior (%)	χ^2 ** p<.05 ***p<.01
Trust in comments/materials posted by other travelers					64.3***
I do not trust at all/too much	6.1	15.6	18.9	35.0	
I somewhat trust	60.6	50.8	59.9	52.2	
I trust/trust very much	33.3	33.6	21.2	12.7	
I trust CGM more than formal travel reviews, articles, guidebooks, etc.					24.8***
Strongly/Somewhat agree	50.0	46.0	37.2	28.7	
I would feel more comfortable basing my trip decisions on 1 review from someone I know rather than on 100 reviews from strangers					17.2***
Strongly/Somewhat agree	54.5	54.0	58.7	72.0	
Perceptions of CGM compare to materials posted by marketers					
More interesting	64.4	60.1	56.1	44.6	16.2**
More up-to-date	59.8	56.9	49.4	38.2	24.1***
More relevant	57.6	57.4	50.0	41.4	17.1***
More details	56.8	51.6	46.8	44.6	8.6
Better in catering to my specific info. needs	56.8	48.4	36.6	25.5	48.6***

Greater impacts and perceived benefits could be a matter of trust in CGM (Yoo et al., 2009). Both Gen X and Gen Y trust materials posted by other travelers, while older generations are more distrusting (Table 4). A large majority of Seniors (72%) would rather receive a review from someone known than 100 reviews from strangers. Younger generations also rate CGM more favorable in comparison to marketer-provided content in terms of it being more interesting, up-to-date, relevant, detailed and better in catering to their needs.

Table 5. Differences in Travel-related CGM Creation

Travel-related CGM Creation	Gen. Y (%)	Gen. X (%)	Boomer (%)	Senior (%)	χ^2 ** p<.05 ***p<.01
Travel CGM creation experience					29.7***
Yes	25.0	22.5	11.6	8.3	
Types of travel-related CGM created by CGM creators					
Reviews	72.7	75.3	75.0	61.5	1.2
Wiki	33.3	21.2	7.5	7.7	9.1**
Discussion board/forum	54.5	56.5	57.5	30.8	3.2
Comment to a blog written by somebody	66.7	49.4	30.0	30.8	11.3**
Microblog entry (e.g. Twitter)	21.2	27.1	2.5	0	14.2***
Blog	60.6	41.2	20.0	15.4	15.8***
Photos	72.7	68.2	25.0	30.8	27.9***
Video	27.3	30.6	2.5	0	17.2***
Barriers to CGM Creation					
Not enough time	62.1	56.6	44.8	42.7	23.3***
No interest	50.8	50.0	61.3	70.7	30.4***

In general, CGM creation is not very pronounced but more likely to occur by members of Gen Y (Table 5). While Gen Y and Gen X are starved for time, Boomers and Seniors report lack of interest as a reason for not creating CGM. Reviews are the most commonly generated form of travel-related CGM. Interestingly, there are no significant differences regarding the creation of reviews and contributions to discussion forums. A surprise is the prominence of photo postings in younger generations while Boomers and Seniors are not likely to post photos online.

APPLICATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study found generational differences in CGM use, perceptions and creation. The findings indicate that these generational differences need to be taken into account when promoting CGM on travel Websites, placing advertising on CGM sites, or conducting research that involves CGM.

Online travel marketers can leverage the findings of this study to enhance their Website features and capabilities. For example, travel Websites that want to attract younger travelers clearly need to promote various types of CGM on their Websites since younger travelers are not only more active users of travel-related CGM but also trust, favorably perceive and rely on CGM more than other cohorts. Strategic marketing planning to attract Gen Y is important as members of Gen Y will increasingly become active travelers in the near future. For those Websites that need to reach all generational groups, providing travel reviews would help since study results show that travelers who use CGM for travel planning mostly take advantage of reviews, regardless of the generation to which they belong.

CGM providers also need to consider the findings of this study to promote their Websites. Results show that CGM creation is still not very pronounced and especially older generations get rarely involved in wiki, video and microblog contents. To reach larger groups of users and creators, CGM providers need to understand the different barriers found in this study in order to successfully motivate different age groups to create CGM.

Marketers who plan to place advertisements on CGM sites can better reach the target market when they understand the visitors of the sites. Our study found that the type of Website on which travelers look for CGM differs depending on their generational cohorts. Tailored advertising messages need to be delivered for specific CGM sites to ensure effective target marketing.

The research presented in this paper contributes to the general understanding of the role of CGM use in the context of travel. It demonstrates that CGM has become a prominent factor in travel-related information search. Most importantly, it indicates that CGM has a significant impact on travel decision-making and planning. Further, the research supports previous findings regarding generational differences, with younger generations being more likely to have adopted travel-related CGM, but it also suggests that some aspects of CGM use apply to online travelers regardless of their age. Overall, there seems to be a great need for more research regarding Gen Y and its technology use as well as travel behaviors given the extensive use of emerging technologies by this generation.

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