

## Tourism-themed internet portals – are new media creating a new tourist? A case study of Polish students

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**Abstracts.** Internet media have an influence on many tourism-related issues. This article presents the results of research into the role of tourism-themed portals in the trips taken by Polish university students between 2010 and 2012. The research sought to answer the following questions: whether tourism-related internet media have an influence on the students' behaviour before, during the trip and when they arrive at their destination; how often they are used by the respondents during their trips; and whether Polish students actively participate in internet media by voicing their opinions. As it appears, internet media serve as one of the “travel companions” for young people. They are used when preparing the trip, the vast majority “take them” with them and check them during the trip, while almost half of them check them on vacation, e.g. to share their experience over the internet.

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## 1. Introduction

The development of new technologies, which may include the internet, is changing travel behav-

iours, as well as the whole tourism industry (Buhalis, 2003; Buhalis, Law, 2008). In today's world, tourists have access to diverse media that facilitate obtaining tourism-related information, which

can directly or indirectly help them plan their vacation (Pan, Fesenmaier, 2006), choose activities at their destination, as well as assess their trip after their return (Dippelreiter et al., 2008). Travel portals have opened new opportunities for tourists by encouraging them to plan their trips and seek information on their own (Xiang, Gretzel, 2010). Thanks to social media such as tripadvisor.com tourists can exchange comments, descriptions and personal experiences of their trips. Each user can create a subject, which may be contributed to by others in the form of comments and advice, in turn allowing other potential tourists to use it (Miguéns, Baggio, Costa, 2008). Travel blogs can be used to share more personal experiences. Studies of selected blogs showed that they “are authentic and untainted manifestation of travellers’ experiences” (Pan, Maclaurin, Crofts 2009). In addition, popular travel websites are connected with such social media as Facebook or Twitter (Milano, Roberta, Rodolfo Baggio and Robert Piattelli). Users of new media believe in the good intentions and honesty of the contributors to consumer-generated media (CGM). They can familiarise themselves with the opinions, comments and photographs published there, which further increases their trust in the media and the benefits of using them when planning their trips. Yoo, K. H., Lee, Y., Gretzel, U., and Fesenmaier, D. R. (2009). There is a group of works taking a theoretical or model approach to the issues, for example Buhalis and O’Connor, 2005.

Such diversity of research topics results in studies of travel websites (their contents, most popular topics, etc.), the statements of the users of such websites, the range of influence of such websites, and their target audience. As Buhalis and Law stated (2008: 619), “The literature review undertaken demonstrates that eTourism research is in its infancy and that a number of issues have only now started being addressed in the literature”. The authors decided to elaborate on this issue in the scientific literature in order to cite examples from different countries and social groups. Research on the role of tourist portals in travelling with the approach presented in the paper has not been performed in Poland or elsewhere.

The aim of the study was to investigate the destinations of students’ travels in the last three years and the role of internet media in their travels. This resulted in the study of the influence of media on the students’

tourist behaviours. A case study was conducted in 2012 among the students of the last year of the Faculty of Geographical Sciences at the University of Lodz.

## 2. Research materials and methods

Surveys were conducted among students because “Access to the Internet is becoming ubiquitous in institutions of higher education. This has been particularly true of the countries in the developed world and is becoming true of developing countries as well. Most colleges and universities in developed countries make access to the World Wide Web (Web) almost as easy and transparent as access to phone lines. Furthermore, students coming out of the high school systems in those countries are increasingly aware of the opportunities offered by the Web, and are often already frequent Web users prior to entering a university.” (Mitra, Willyard, Platt, Parsons, 2005, Introduction).

The study involved 112 students of the master’s programs in the Faculty of Geographical Sciences, University of Lodz. Surveys were conducted on campus before lectures, they were given out to students who filled them themselves. Everyone had an opportunity to fill a survey. Surveys were anonymous and they were filled by half of the students of each of the three majors at the faculty graduating in 2013. It can be assumed that they are representative for this social group. Of the 112 respondents, 44% were students of geography, 27% of spatial planning and 29% of tourism and recreation. The unequal participation of students from different majors stems from the differences in the number of students in these majors. Several statistical methods were used to present the data, including tables and graphs, ranking, cross tabulation and correlation coefficients according to the variables in the order scale (Spearman’s Rho) and the nominal scale (Kramer’s V). Only the dependencies with significance less than 0.05 were discussed. SPSS software was used.

## 3. Research results

The study focused on travels by the students of three majors in the Faculty of Geographical Scienc-

es within three years (2010-2012) and the role of travel portals in these travels.

The total amount of all tourist trips in three years undertaken by all 112 respondents was 601. Poland was the most visited country (64%). The most popular foreign destinations were located in Europe, in the Mediterranean: Spain (6% of visits, 37 trips), Italy (4%, 26 trips), France (3%, 21 trips), Portu-

gal, Greece (2%). The United Kingdom and Croatia were also visited. It is worth mentioning that there were only 3 trips to countries located further away, i.e. one trip to the United States, China and Singapore. The major was found to be a differentiating factor in travel destinations, especially as regards domestic and foreign destinations (Kramer's  $V = .301 < .000, N = 601$ ).

**Table 1.** Differences in foreign and domestic travel by major in 2010, 2011 and 2012. Cross tabulation

| Major                  |                   | Destination  |              | Total         |
|------------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
|                        |                   | Poland       | Abroad       |               |
| Geography              | Quantity          | 184          | 59           | 243           |
|                        | % of major        | 75.7%        | 24.3%        | 100.0%        |
| Spatial planning       | Quantity          | 103          | 39           | 142           |
|                        | % of major        | 72.5%        | 27.5%        | 100.0%        |
| Tourism and Recreation | Quantity          | 96           | 120          | 216           |
|                        | % of major        | 44.4%        | 55.6%        | 100.0%        |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>Quantity</b>   | <b>383</b>   | <b>218</b>   | <b>601</b>    |
|                        | <b>% of major</b> | <b>63.7%</b> | <b>36.3%</b> | <b>100.0%</b> |

Source: Author's calculations

Even though all students came from the same faculty at the University of Lodz and the same last year of master's programs, there is diversity in their destinations (Table. 1). 55.6% of Tourism and Recreation students went abroad, while only one in four went to a different destination. After the number and destination of tourist trips were determined, the question concerning the role of internet portals in students' travels was raised.

The first question "What are your associations with travel websites?" was an open-ended one, showing the first associations the respondents have with this medium. Respondents had an opportunity to give more than one answer, but the majority gave just one, with 132 associations in total. Most associations (22.7%) referred to tourist information and the ability to book services offered by travel websites (18.2%) and travel offers (13.6%) (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Types of associations of respondents with travel websites N=112.

| What are your associations with travel websites? | N = 132 <sup>a</sup> | %     | Rank |
|--|----------------------|-------|------|
| tourism information                              | 2                    | 1.52  | 10   |
| travel blogs                                     | 9                    | 6.82  | 6    |
| lack of reliable information                     | 1                    | 0.76  | 12   |
| tourist information                              | 30                   | 22.73 | 1    |
| geographical information                         | 10                   | 7.58  | 5    |
| ability to book services                         | 24                   | 18.18 | 2    |
| trip offers                                      | 18                   | 13.64 | 3    |
| tourists' opinions                               | 12                   | 9.09  | 4    |
| descriptions of places                           | 4                    | 3.03  | 7    |
| descriptions of regions                          | 1                    | 0.76  | 13   |
| advice for tourists                              | 2                    | 1.52  | 11   |
| websites for travel agents                       | 4                    | 3.03  | 8    |
| route planning                                   | 3                    | 2.27  | 9    |
| others   | 5                    | 3.79  | x    |
| I don't know                                     | 1                    | 0.76  | x    |
| n/a  | 6                    | 4.55  | x    |

<sup>a</sup> multiple choice

Source: Author's calculations

Students also associate travel portals with travel blogs (9.1%). This mostly includes all types of advice and descriptions of places visited during trips. The respondents find such portals useful in finding information, e.g. concerning life in a given place, cultural customs in different countries described by a person who went there and experienced a given situation. Another type of associations concerned geographical information (7.6%), which mostly related to nature and naturally special places such as national parks, landscape parks, and natural monuments, or the natural characteristics of a given place.

Major was again the variable differentiating the associations with travel websites (Kramer's  $V = .680$ ,  $p < .002$ ). The associations of students of geography with travel websites were highly dispersed, with geographical information (16%) and travel offers (12%) being the most often given ones. Spatial planning students pointed out tourist information (26.6%), ability to book services (20%) and descriptions of places they were going to (10%). The associations of tourism and recreation students were different

and more concentrated, as 40% of them cited the ability to book travel services, 21.9% tourist information and 12.5% travel blogs. Such diversity may stem from the fact that over half of the trips taken by tourism and recreation students were abroad (as opposed to trips taken by other majors, with approx. 25% being foreign travel).

The research involved the students of the Faculty of Geographical Sciences, so the following question was also included: "Do you use portals with maps, or geoportals, to plan your trips?" As much as 87% of respondents answered that they used such portals, while the remaining portion said they did not. This knowledge, as well as the need to use portals that provide tourist information in text and photographs, and spatial information on maps, may stem from the knowledge and skill gained by the students during the several years of studying at the Faculty of Geographical Sciences.

The next question concerned the types of travel portals that the respondents used during their travels in the last 3 years. This question allowed the respondents to choose one of 11 answers (Table 3.)

**Table 3.** Types of travel portals used by respondents in their travels (N=112).

| Types of travel portals  | Number of answers <sup>a</sup> | % N=112 | Rank |
|--|--------------------------------|---------|------|
| Booking portals (e.g. booking.com, hostelworld.com)            | 39                             | 34.82   | 3    |
| Route-planning portals (maps.google.com)                       | 91                             | 81.25   | 1    |
| Travel blogs (e.g. blog.esky.pl)                               | 12                             | 10.71   | 10   |
| Websites for travel agents (e.g. neckermann.pl)                | 20                             | 17.86   | 7    |
| Thematic websites concerning one type of tourism (e.g. hiking) | 13                             | 11.61   | 9    |
| Portals for specific places (e.g. barcelona.com. gdansk.pl)    | 65                             | 58.04   | 2    |
| Virtual guides (e.g. e-przewodniki.pl)                         | 24                             | 21.43   | 5    |
| Local tourist offices (such as the city of Poznan. Krakow)     | 23                             | 20.54   | 6    |
| Comprehensive tourist services (e.g. tripadvisor.com)          | 27                             | 24.11   | 4    |
| Online travel agencies (e.g. travelplanet.pl)                  | 14                             | 12.50   | 8    |
| Others (specify)   | 4                              | 3.57    | 11   |

<sup>a</sup> multiple choice

Source: Author's calculations

Studies have shown that route-planning websites, such as maps.google.com, zumi.pl and others, that facilitate reaching the destination are the most widely used ones (81.3%). Another types of websites popular among the respondents (58%) are the websites for specific places, such as a city or a region, e.g. barcelona.com, gdansk.pl, allowing them to obtain all kinds of information about the desti-

nation, as well as booking portals (34.8%) such as booking.com, hostelworld.com that allow booking of services ranging from accommodation, air, bus or train tickets to dinner reservations. One in four respondents admitted to using versatile travel websites such as tripadvisor.com, while one in five used the websites of local tourist offices, virtual guides or travel agents. As far as other types of portals are

concerned, they included weather websites, online cameras, and the couchsurfing portal that allows the users to stay at another user's house for free.

The motives behind the respondents seeking information on travel websites are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Type of motivation for using portals.

| Motivations   | Number of answers <sup>a</sup> | % N=112 | Rank |
|---|--------------------------------|---------|------|
| Lack of knowledge about reliable and credible sources of information (guides, maps) available on the market | 19                             | 16.96   | 6    |
| Easy access to portals.   | 93                             | 83.04   | 1    |
| Low prices of tourist services offered on the sites.  | 20                             | 17.86   | 4    |
| A wide range of accommodation to choose from all over the world.  | 49                             | 43.75   | 3    |
| The ability to read reviews from other tourists.  | 52                             | 46.43   | 2    |
| The site is available in many languages.  | 2                              | 1.79    | 8    |
| Website versatility.  | 13                             | 11.61   | 7    |
| Others (specify)  | 18                             | 16.07   | 5    |

<sup>a</sup> multiple choice

Source: Author's calculations

Studies have shown (Table 4) that easy access to travel websites is the prime motivation to use them – 83% of the answers. Without leaving home and going to travel agents, tourist information or library, they can use the internet to find tourist information and use a wide range of services in minutes. Almost half of the respondents (46.4%) indicated the need to read the reviews from other travelers about accommodation or places to visit, as well as a wide selection of accommodation in many facilities located around the world (43.8%). Further motivations were low prices of tourist services offered on the sites (17.9%), the versatility of such websites (11.6%), for example concerning the possibility of organising many elements of the trip or obtaining various types of information in one place.

Some of the respondents lacked knowledge about reliable and credible sources of information available on the market, i.e. traditional sources such as guides or maps, so they used online sources instead (17%).

Viewing online travel portals is associated with the search for the information that a potential tourist might need (Table 5). Studies have shown that nearly 90% of students were looking for air tickets, half of them looked for information concerning places worth visiting and eating at, as well as accommodation (37%), while one-third of them looked for opinions from other tourists. Only a few people browsed information in order to get a “general feel” of the accommodation costs in a given place or the costs of travel offers.

**Table 5.** Types of information contained in portals used by respondents (N=112)

| Types of tourist information            | Number of answers <sup>a</sup> | % N=112 | Rank |
|---|--------------------------------|---------|------|
| information about places to visit       | 58                             | 51.79   | 2    |
| other tourists' opinions                | 32                             | 28.57   | 5    |
| information about booking a flight      | 97                             | 86.61   | 1    |
| information about booking accommodation | 41                             | 36.61   | 4    |
| information about food services         | 54                             | 48.21   | 3    |
| others (specify)                        | 4                              | 3.57    | 6    |

<sup>a</sup> multiple choice

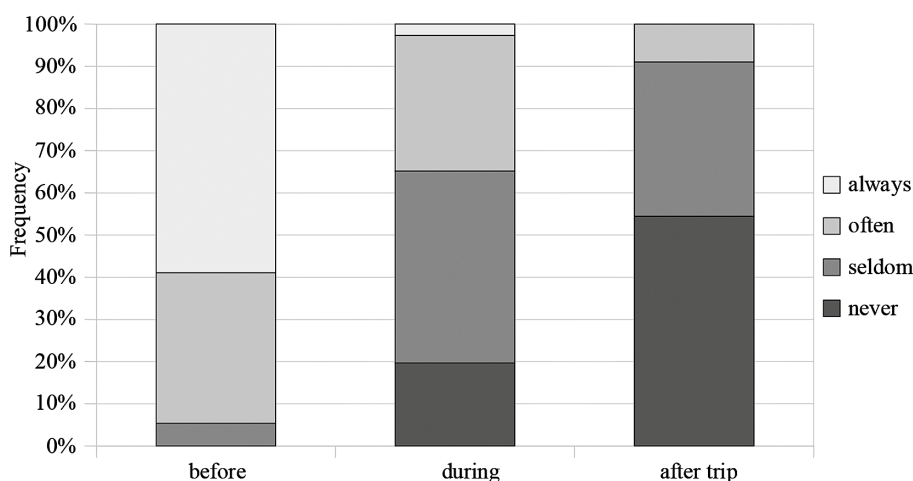
Source: Author's calculations

The results showed that the travel portals make it much easier for students to prepare for the trip and stay at their destination. One of the questions asked the respondents to indicate the degree to which travel portals facilitate the preparation before their trip and their stay at the destination, with 1 meaning “do not facilitate at all” and 5 meaning “facilitate to a vast degree”. The vast majority (68%) pointed to 4 and 5 (53% indicated 4, 15% indicated 5), with one-fifth of the students claiming that portals help them to an average degree. Only a small percentage (7% marked 2) of respondents believe that such portals help them to a small degree, and only 3% said they do not help them at all when preparing for the trip and staying at their destination.

All respondents used travel portals, with a large portion interested in opinions given after the return. One of the questions in the survey sought to find

the influence of comments and opinions from other tourists on the choice of tourist services. The question was: “Is your choice of destination, accommodation, restaurant influenced by the comments and opinions from other tourists?”. The majority of respondents (87%) is influenced by them to a larger or lesser degree: 5% of the students always take them into account, 37% – often and 45% – seldom. Only 13% of students answered that they are never influenced by comments.

Today’s tourist is able to use the internet in various conditions, i.e. when preparing for the journey, at their destination and after they come back. The students’ opinion on this matter was therefore worth learning. They were asked about the frequency of their use of portals during different stages of their trips, i.e. before they leave, at their destination and after they come back (always, often, seldom, never).



**Fig. 1.** Frequency of use of travel portals by respondents at different stages of their trips.

Source: Own elaboration

The results showed (Fig. 1.) that all respondents used the tourist portals before they left, with 59% using them “always” and 36% “often”. Only 5% of students participating in the survey chose the answer “seldom”. One in five students never used the internet while travelling. Nowadays, more and more people have internet-connected phones, but we have to remember that despite their accessibility and ubiquity among students, internet media and smartphones are still often too expensive for them. The graph shows that only 3% of respondents al-

ways use online travel portals during their trips, 32% use them often and 46% – seldom. This may be due to the high cost of data transfer and their lack of the need to use them.

While the cost of internet connection when travelling may be an understandable barrier to using it, the fact that 54% of them do not visit travel portals after they come back and 37% do it rarely may be puzzling. Only 9% use them often after they come back. This is perplexing OR baffling, as all of the respondents use them before they leave (Figure 1),

and most of them visit sites with tourists' opinions. This may mean that some students do not need to share their own experiences and tourism portals are treated in a very utilitarian, and not social, fashion.

This conclusion may be confirmed by the answer to another question concerning the frequency of commenting, adding reviews or assessments by the respondents on travel portals. Most respondents (63%) never added any comments on travel portals, with none of the respondents doing it "always". Only 29% of surveyed students often add comments or reviews, with 7% doing this rarely. The respondents most often added comments concerning accommodation service (75%), restaurants (15%) or visits to popular tourist spots (10%). Apart from the type, motivation and time of using travel portals and other sources of tourist information, the results allow us to extrapolate certain characteristics of modern young tourists – students.

The frequency of using travel portals during the preparation, the stay and after they come back is important. An analysis of the dependencies shows that the more frequently they used the portals before the trip (when preparing – booking accommodation, looking for available restaurants and places worth visiting), the more they visited them after they came back (e.g. to rate, reviews and comment the places they had visited (Spearman's Rho = .191,  $p < .05$ ). We can also say that the more frequently the respondents used these portals during their trip (to find information while they stayed somewhere, e.g.

about restaurants, events, places worth visiting), the more they visited them after they came back (e.g. to rate, review and comment on the places they had visited (Spearman's Rho = 0.283,  $p < .05$ ).

Travel portals influence the tourist behaviours of students and strengthen them. Students influenced by the reviews from other tourists say that they made it easier for them to plan their trips and stay at their destination (Spearman's Rho = .271,  $p < .01$ ). Reviews added by other tourists made them more likely to share their own opinions with other users of travel portals (Spearman's Rho = .248,  $p < .01$ ).

This means that there is a group of tourists among the surveyed students for whom new media are "travel companions" and who are active members of the internet community.

The research focussed primarily on travel portals. As stated, internet media are ubiquitous among students/tourists, but they are not the only option available. In addition to online portals, there are many sources of knowledge, such as guides, maps, tourist magazines, brochures, or simply tourist information office at a given location. They can be used before the trip and during the stay. They are a source of geographical and tourist information. Therefore, their use in the tourist behaviours of students may be interesting. Are internet media enough for them or do they look for other sources? Therefore, respondents were asked another question: "Do you use any other sources of information concerning tourist trips apart from travel portals?"

**Table 6.** Frequency of use of sources of knowledge other than travel portals.

| Frequency of use of sources of knowledge other than travel portals. | Number of answers | % N=112 | Rank |
|---|-------------------|---------|------|
| never   | 3                 | 2.68    | 4    |
| rarely  | 28                | 25.00   | 2    |
| often   | 56                | 50.00   | 1    |
| always  | 25                | 22.32   | 3    |

Source: Author's calculations

In the second decade of the 21st century, the age of internet and travel portals that allow users to quickly reach the information they need, most students still used traditional sources, with 50% using them often or always (Table 6) and just 3% never using them. Respondents had the op-

portunity to indicate which sources they use in the subsequent question (Table 7). Three-quarters of respondents used travel guides (75.9%), and maps (69.6%), which can be explained by the specificity of the test group of students at the Faculty of Geographical Sciences, University of

Lodz. In addition, a large group of respondents (42%), brochures (41.1%) and tourist magazines drew knowledge from tourist information centres (13.4%).

**Table 7.** Types of other sources containing tourist information used by the respondents. (N = 112)

| Sources containing tourist information | Number of answers <sup>a</sup> | % N = 112 | Rank |
|--|--------------------------------|-----------|------|
| Guides                                 | 85                             | 75,89     | 1    |
| Brochures                              | 46                             | 41,07     | 4    |
| Tourist information centres            | 47                             | 41,96     | 3    |
| Maps                                   | 78                             | 69,64     | 2    |
| Tourist magazines                      | 15                             | 13,39     | 5    |
| Other                                  | 2                              | 1,79      | 6    |

<sup>a</sup> multiple choice

Source: Author's calculations

One variable differentiating the use of sources other than travel portals was the major (Kramer's  $V = .307$ ,  $p < .002$ ). Students of tourism and recre-

ation, perhaps due to their major, used other sources of information than the students of geography or spatial planning (Table 8).

**Table 8.** Frequency of use of sources of knowledge other than travel portals, according to respondents' major. Cross tabulation.

| Major                  |            | Do you use any other sources of information concerning tourist trips apart from travel portals? |       |        |       | Total  |
|------------------------|------------|---|-------|--------|-------|--------|
|                        |            | always  | often | rarely | never |        |
| Geography              | Quantity   | 6   | 28    | 14     | 2     | 50     |
|                        | % of major | 12.0%   | 56.0% | 28.0%  | 4.0%  | 100.0% |
| Spatial planning       | Quantity   | 3   | 16    | 10     | 1     | 30     |
|                        | % of major | 10.0%   | 53.3% | 33.3%  | 3.3%  | 100.0% |
| Tourism and Recreation | Quantity   | 16  | 12    | 4      | 0     | 32     |
|                        | % of major | 50.0%   | 37.5% | 12.5%  | 0.0%  | 100.0% |
| Total                  | Quantity   | 25  | 56    | 28     | 3     | 112    |
|                        | % of major | 22.3%   | 50.0% | 25.0%  | 2.7%  | 100.0% |

Source: Author's calculations

Half of the respondents majoring in tourism and recreation always use other sources containing information related to tourist trips, with only 13% using them rarely, and no respondents answering that they never use them. In comparison, the students of spatial planning and geography do not use other sources of information that often. It is worth noting that these groups included students that chose the answer "never": 3% of spatial planning students and 4% of geography students.

#### 4. Discussion

To summarize the study of the students of the Faculty of Geographical Sciences of the University of Lodz, we can say that their tourist activity was high (4.5 times per person on average), and all of them used travel portals before their trips. They travelled to both domestic (63.7%) and foreign (36.3%) des-



tinations, mostly in Europe, with single people visiting the US, China and Singapore.

All surveyed students knew the concept of travel portals but their first association with them varied greatly. The largest number of associations (22.7%) were related to tourist information, booking services (18.2%), trip offers (13.6%) and travel blogs (9.1%).

Students used online portals for various purposes. It is interesting that the vast majority knew and used mapping portals with route-planning features (maps.google.com, zumi.pl, geoportals). This may have been the result of the test group (students at the Faculty of Geographical Sciences). Slightly more than half of them checked the portals for specific cities or regions they were going to, with one-third using portals that allowed them to book accommodation, buy tickets or book restaurant tables. One-fourth used versatile travel websites such as tripadvisor.com, while one-fifth used local travel agents' websites. In addition, single people used weather portals, online cameras and couchsurfing social website.

What were their motivations to use this medium? The main ones were the accessibility of online sources, the need to learn the opinions of other tourists, the ability to choose accommodation all over the world, low prices of services offered by the portals. These results correspond to a degree with the motivations of Canadians (Beldona et al., 2005), whose main motivations to buy tourist services (accommodations, flights, car rentals) online were low prices, easy booking and accessibility.

The students looked for current and practical information such as flight booking, places worth visiting and food services and accommodation. Only a few people browsed information in order to get a "general feel" of the accommodation costs in a given place or the costs of travel offers. We can thus conclude that the students surveyed are conscious tourists who use new technologies to organise their trips, but who do not shun traditional media such as guides, maps, and journals (especially tourism and recreation students, probably due to the fact that they left Poland more often than the other majors).

Opinions from other tourists published on travel websites are taken into account by most respondents, and the ones that used them more often were more likely to get back to them after their return

and leave their own comments. It can thus be concluded that internet media are one of the "travel companions" of young people. They are used when preparing the trip, the vast majority "take them" with them and check them during the trip (80%), while almost half of them check them on vacation, e.g. to share their experience over the internet. It can also be said that new media created new tourist behaviours.

## 5. Conclusion

Even though all students belong to the same faculty of the University of Lodz, some of their opinions were statistically dependent on their major. Tourism and recreation students were more active in foreign travel, they had more mercantile associations with travel portals, and more often used sources of information other than online portals than the students of spatial planning or geography. That is why similar studies should be conducted in different groups of students or social groups, and their results should be compared.

To sum up the research, we can say that all the students who participated in the study used tourism-themed Internet media. Other than the opportunity to book tourist services, students most often searched for information on places worth visiting (both before and during their travels). This means that, to an extent, such services shaped their tourist behaviours. We can assume that by actively participating in the media and sharing their travel experiences in tourism-themed blogs, some students who took part in the study also shaped the tourist behaviours of other people.

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