



# The role of social media sites in trip planning and destination decision-making processes

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## Abstract

The main aim of this study was to examine the influence of social media sites on trip decision making process as well as to investigate the most used social media sites during trip planning through a review of literature. This study was based on an extensive review of literature from a range of peer reviewed papers on social media and tourist destination planning. A number of sources were accessed such as Science Direct, Google Scholar, Emerald Insights Journals, Institutional Repository, Scopus, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, SAePublications, Sabinet, and ProQuest, while articles from tourism organisations such as the World Tourism Organisation were also consulted. The sources were thus used as part of data collection procedure and were critically examined for information related to social media and travel decision-making processes. The objectives of the study were achieved through literature findings which demonstrated that social media sites are used at each stage of trip planning but are predominantly used at the information search stage and after trip for experience sharing. The review of literature also shows that social media sites are now being considered as the most reliable sources of information following recommendations from family and friends. It is critical for tourism business owners to be present in social media sites to connect with prospective customers. They also need to understand the types of social media sites frequently used by tourists in different regions and to ensure that content regarding their attractions and services is always accurately posted on those sites.

**Key words:** Social media, trip planning, destination, decision-making process.

## Introduction

The rise of the internet and its related technologies especially, social media platforms, has long been realised as continuously affecting consumers' decision-making in the tourism industry (Buhalis, 1998). This is mainly in the planning and usage of tourism services and products (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Social media can be described as a "group of applications which operates on the internet Web 2.0 and allows for the exchange of information among the users" (Colomo-Palacios, Soto-Acosta, Ramayah & Russ, 2013). Due to the interactivity of most social media, users can form relationships through the exchange of information, experiences, opinions and ideas regarding goods and services (Dwitya & Briandana, 2017). With its ability to disseminate vast amounts of information within short spaces of time, social media has become an ideal platform for the tourism industry which relies on intensive information for its operation (Rathonyi, 2013).

Travellers have to gather a lot of information before making a final decision to purchase travel related products to lower the risk associated with purchase tourism services which emanates from the experimental characteristics of most tourism products purchases (Roque & Raposo, 2016). Thus, to reduce the risk and uncertainty associated with purchasing of travel related products, tourists now depend mostly on information from others. It is widely believed that information posted by other travellers on online platforms is viewed as the same as the offline recommendations from friends, family and other travellers (Gururaja, 2015; Fridolf &



Arnatovic, 2011; Chan & Guillet, 2011; Icoz, Kutuk & Icoz, 2018). Gros (2012) also pointed out that online platforms can cause remarkable changes in the behaviour of tourists since tourists normally look for other consumers' opinions and recommendations when making purchase decisions. Social media content often generates interest due to the way it is presented especially in form of images and experiences (Fortis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012). Consequently, social networks are now beginning to be important sources information to travellers (Gros, 2012) and are continuously playing a crucial role during holiday planning processes since they provide an opportunity for people to see or read about the experiences of other tourists (Yoo, 2008). Fortis, Buhalis and Rossides (2012) indicate that content posted on social networks particularly from reputational people can have a strong effect on trip planning as well as final decision making. In addition, Shyle (2015) states that social media has transformed the manner in which travellers collect the information needed for travel decision-making. Consumers now depend on the experience of other travellers to plan for vacation and reduce uncertainty (Hua, Ramayah, Ping & Jun-Hwa, 2017). Roque and Raposo (2016) specified social media is now becoming an important source of information for travellers. Thus, making them important tools which the tourism industry cannot afford to neglect.

Nevertheless, little has been done to synthesise literature regarding the influence of these sites on tourist decision-making and trip planning. Thus, a literature study is needed to synthesize previous work regarding how tourists use social media for trip planning, establishing the trip stages which social media sites are pre-dominantly used for and determining which are the most used sites. This information is vital to tourism business and destination marketers to help them understand how tourists behave online when searching for travel information and to help them enhance their online marketing strategies.

Considering the aforementioned importance of social media sites for the tourism industry, the study seeks to synthesize the work that has been done on the role of social media on travel decision-making. A review of previous literature regarding this matter can help to uncover travellers' online behaviour when searching and planning trips. The actual objectives of this paper were to 1) examine how social media sites influence the tourist behaviour when making travel decisions 2) to identify the trip planning stages at which travellers most use social media sites and 3) to examine which social media site are popularly used by tourist to search for travel information.

### **Literature review (The decision-making process)**

The increasing use of internet technologies and the evolving of social media sites within the past decade has changed the way tourism destinations promote their services and products (Tafveez, 2017). Roque and Raposo (2016), state social media sites are becoming very important information sources for travellers. In any destination and tourism business, social media are becoming relevant and are part of tourism practices which are affecting business operations. Literature reviewed points out that social media are mainly used at the post trip phase for sharing experiences (Zivkovic et al., 2017). Also, travellers can be influenced to change their holiday plans before making final decision due to content posted on social media sites (Roque & Raposo, 2016). Information posted on online communities, is viewed as more trustworthy than information on websites of tourism organisations, travel agents and other mass media advertising (Fortis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012).

Instead of depending on information from travel agents and tour operators, tourist nowadays search on the internet and social media sites for tourism attractions to visit and types of accommodation to use (Fortis et al., 2011). Tourists today want to actively participate in the purchase process, and have more knowledge and can easily use different internet sites to search for information about other travellers' experience and can open videos posted by others on sites such as YouTube (Gross, 2012). Rathonyi (2012) added that today's tourist is more



enlightened and needs newly developed media when finding or communicating with tourism service providers . Zivkovic et al., (2017) asserts that the new tourist is strongly influenced by social media as they use information posted on social media affect their decision-making process especially travel decisions.

When making a travel decision, the most important aspect considered by tourist is information search (Nothi, 2013). It constitutes making travel decisions on something that one does not have any physical experience with, and this requires an intensive information search when compared to other products. The decision in such situations is based personal sources like friends, colleagues and family members (Bonera, 2008). Jenkin (2010) asserts that when tourists want to visit well known destinations they rely heavily on information from families, friends and from their past experiences, while those who plan to visit further uncommon destinations look for lot of information in order to make informed decisions.

Travel related social media sites such as TripAdvisor allows tourists to review comments and ratings posted by other travellers who have visited similar destinations and make decisions based on the ratings and comments made (Miguens, Baggio & Costa, 2008). In relation to travel plans and advice, most people refer to TripAdvisor which is one of the largest travel sites as well as Facebook (Jadhav et al., 2018). The value of Facebook for sharing travel information for example, videos, photos and experiences, during the trip or after the vacation has been highlighted by previous studies (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). Some researchers emphasise that Facebook plays a critical role at pre-trip stages as it provides important information which can be used for planning and making a final travel decision (Jadhav et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2012).

During the trip phase, travellers are going through the travel experience, and this is when the consumption of tourism products such as transportation, food, accommodation and site seeing takes place (Jadhav et al., 2018). Tourists at this stage also search for more information about other attractions and transport used in a particular area (Dwityas & Briandana, 2017). At this stage tourist have to decide on the activities to undertake as well as some more attractions around that particular area. Tourist rely on friends who have visited similar places to provide information about attractions and activities to undertake, hence, sites such as Facebook are utilised to chat with friends (Shyle, 2015).

After the trip phase is when all the activities have been completed. It is when travellers are done with their activities and are back home when the trip is over. This is when travellers evaluate their experiences to check whether they were satisfied or not, and decide whether to drop some activities, products or the information sources used during travelling process (Dwityas & Briandana, 2017).

Jadhav, Raman, Patwa and Moorthy (2018) assert that social media sites such as TripAdvisor and Facebook can now be viewed as new electronic word of mouth (e-WO M) which can be defined as a group of people who engage in conversations using electronic ways mainly through social media sites, and who can form a social relationship. The integration of different networks and social relationships among people has really turned social media into an electronic 'Word of Mouth' (e-WOM) (Rodriguez, 2009). Since people trust word of mouth when making important decisions, social media sites have become another avenue in which people can share vital travel information.

Sood, Kattiyapornpong and Miller (20011) and Gururain (2015) also indicated the manner in which individuals plan and undertake holiday trips or how travel has been significantly altered by social media sites. The time spent searching for travel information has been reduced by social media use. In short, social networks have become highly influential sources of information to tourist as they have completely changed how tourist search, collect and disseminate travel information and experiences.



## Methodology

This study was based on a review of literature from a wide range of peer reviewed papers on social media and tourist destination planning, social media use reports. An extensive literature review on social media and the destination decision-making process was conducted. A number of sources were referenced, and these include Science Direct, Google Scholar, Emerald Insights Journals, Institutional Repository, Scopus, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, SAePublications, Sabinet, and ProQuest. In addition, articles from tourism organisations focusing on social media were also consulted. These sources were used as part of a data collection procedure and were critically examined for information related to social media and the travel decision-making process. Thus, the objectives of the study were achieved through an understanding of literature. This study reviews and analyses of all extant social media and decision making-related research articles published in academic journals in tourism and hospitality fields was most useful. Articles from the consumers perspective were analysed since the study's focus was to examine how travellers use social media when making trip decisions.

## Findings from the literature

Gretzel et al. (2007) examined how online travel reviews on TripAdvisor can impact consumer travel decision making. Their survey included 1480 trip advisor. Their study revealed that opinions posted on online travel review sites by other travellers were most sources of information frequently used by travellers (Gretzel et al., 2007). It was also revealed by their study that throughout the travel planning process, travellers continuously check accommodation reviews in order to decide on the type accommodation to use. Similarly, Di Pietro and Di Virgilio (2012) and Xiang and Gretzel (2010) both concluded that social networks are being used to a large extent by tourists for trip planning as well as general purposes. Atadil (2011) examined the social networks perception of tourism customers and their results revealed that travellers obtain most of the information pertaining to hotels from social media and the information is used as a basis of hotel selection.

In 2011, Sood, Kattiyapornpong, and Miller examined social network usage by travellers to Australia and their study revealed that almost half of the travellers refer to social media when planning for trips and the predominantly used site was Facebook. This is also consistent with Mantika's (2012), findings which also revealed that almost half of the respondents investigated in their study which focused on the impact of social media on consumer used Facebook for trip planning.

In a bid to establish how social media can influence trip planning process, Cox, Burgess, Sellitto and Buultjens (2009) discovered that social media sites are intensively mostly used prior to the trip in order to search for travel information (Pre-trip phase). While during the trip their use is minimal. Likewise, de Souza and Machado (2017) also revealed that most travellers investigated in their study used social media sites for trip planning and 48.4% have reported to have diverted from their earliest trip plans after seeing information posted on social media sites. This implies that it is possible for travellers to divert their trip plans after going through online reviews and postings. Forties et al., (2012) also examined the use of social media during trip planning and discovered that the information search and post trip phase are the most phases where social media sites are predominantly used and this notion was also supported by Rathonyi (2013).

Likewise, Jadhav, Raman, Patwa and Moorthy (2018) studied the effect of Facebook on the behaviour of leisure travellers in Singapore and discovered, trip planning, travel frequency and experience sharing are strongly influenced by Facebook. In the same wave, a study by Gururain in 2015 revealed that 69% of the world's population use social media for tourism needs and further preciously revealed that 24% of the world's population depends on social



media to select restaurants, 34% to choose destination attractions and 35% for choosing vacation places, with Facebook being the dominant social media sites used by travellers. A recent study conducted by Osei, Mensah and Amenumeyi (2018) in Ghana revealed that most of the international tourists investigated pointed out that social media make their travel planning easier. The results of their study further confirmed that Facebook was the most dominant social media site used by the international tourist followed by Google maps. While, Dina and Sabou (2012) studied the influence of social media on destination choice by Romanian young people and found that the dominant and most trusted social media site used was YouTube.

Shyle and Hysi's (2015) study on social media impact on trip decision making, reported that 91% of the respondents included in their study turn to social media sites when searching for information about hotel, tickets and tourist packages when planning a trip and most of the people specified that information posted on social media sites is dependable. Conversations between friends on social media sites were found to be the most reliable source of credible information according to their study.

Karr (2018) reviewed the statistics of how travellers in United States of America use social media and found that 30% of the travellers turn to social media to find some trip inspiration. Also revealed by the study is that 40% of USA millennium use Instagram during trip planning and the majority use the site to post hotel reviews after a trip. Similarly, Fortis et al (2012), examined the influence of social media during holiday planning and discovered that social media sites were used pre-dominantly at the post trip phase for social sharing (sharing experiences to family and friends). Kumar and Ganapathi (2017) also examined how social media can influence travellers decisions in Chennai, and they discovered that the majority of the females included in the study pointed out that they used social media mostly for leisure purposes, for instance to search for trip information.

Sahin and Sengun (2015) investigated the influence of social media on destination decision making on the students of Atilim University in Turkey. Their results revealed that tourism's younger generation's travel decisions are greatly influenced by personal experiences and other travellers' comments and opinions on social media sites (Sahin & Sengün, 2015). Supporting this, Tarfveez's 2017 study on effects of social media revealed that customers, in order to make concrete decisions about their trips and to share what they have experienced as a destination, often refer to social networking sites. In Indonesia it was revealed by Dwityas and Briandan (2017) that most travellers resort to social media sites on all the trip planning stages, from information search to post-trip experience. A Consumer Trends survey (2014), revealed that there was an increasing use of reviews sites by travellers and the role of sites such as TripAdvisor in travel decision making is certainly growing. Hamid, Wee, Hanafia and Asri (2016) found a positive relationship between social media's two-way communication attribute and tourist decision making.

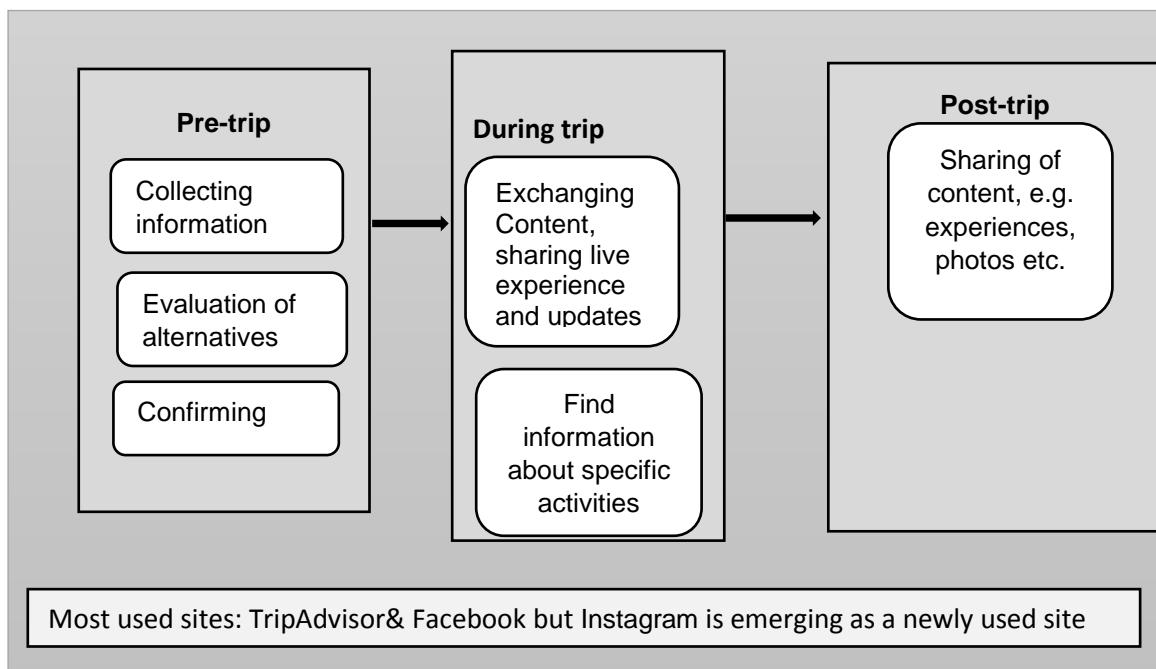
The review of literature also shows that although TripAdvisor and Facebook are the predominantly used social media sites by travellers, Instagram has now emerged as new social media site being used by millennials to search for travel information and to share their experiences using hashtags to attract others (Tong, 2018). Tong's study revealed that the majority of Hong Kong travellers use Instagram on the dream stage by following travel related comments and on the planning stage to seek for information on attractions and leisure activities. Also, Tong's study revealed that Instagram is used to share live experience as well as to stay connected with friends. Moreover, travellers also use this social media site to share their travel experiences after their trips.

On the other hand, some studies presented some contradictory findings, de Souza and Machado's (2017) study on use and influence of social media on trip planning revealed that most travellers included in their study pointed out that they do not have much trust on information posted on social media platforms. Similary, Pesonen and Pasanen (2017) also found that some of the travellers included in their study do not use social media at all when

making trip decisions. Hernandez- Mendez et al (2013) revealed that tourists tend to use official websites more than social media sites when making travel decisions.

Although a few studies presented some contradictory findings regarding the use of social media on travel decision-making, the majority of the studies confirmed that travellers are indeed now relying more on social media to search for travel information and selecting a destination to visit. Information posted on social media and photos shared on social media sites by travellers after their trips is becoming the basis upon which many tourists are now making their travel decisions.

A summary of how social media sites are used in the trip decision making stages is presented diagrammatically in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Uses of social media sites in trip decision making process

### Implications to tourism businesses and destination marketers

As each day passes, social networks are continuing to be an important source of information for travellers and have a great impact on the current trip planning process (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). The number of travellers who are influenced by these social networks is on the rise hence, presenting some opportunities as well challenges to tourism destinations and marketers alike (Lange Faria & Elliot, 2012). It is therefore now critical for tourism business and destination marketers to understand how tourists use social media online for travel purposes. This is since tourist behaviour on social media sites are likely to influence their travel decision making regarding every trip element inter alia, accommodation, attractions, activities, transportation (Noti, 2013). The popularity of media sites such as Facebook, YouTube & Webpage has increased and trends are indicating social media sites are becoming part of the educated and young people's everyday lives, thus tourism businesses must be present in these sites so as to easily connect with prospective customers. This enables them to be in contact with tourism consumers and to possibly tape or have a record of their conversation concerning their products and services. Accessibility of tourism and hospitality services through social media could likely increase the number of people who want to buy these services, creating a unique opportunity for marketers to reach more consumer groups than ever before.



Social networks are continuously developing as each day passes, such that a lot of new social networks are joining the band of sources of information thereby dominating the traditional sources of information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Thus, tourism businesses cannot afford to ignore the role of social media sites in dissemination of needed travel information. For tourism business to influence travel decision making, they need to identify and understand the sources of information used by tourism consumers in order to enhance their marketing efforts. Literature shows that Instagram is emerging as one of the most used site, thus destination marketers should take note of this new change in tourist behaviour. Moreover, tourism businesses also need to understand the types of social media sites used by different segments for them to develop an ideal marketing strategy for each segment. For instance, the review of literature shows that Instagram is commonly used by the millennials.

Colliander (2012) states that being present on these sites will also help tourism business to react and respond to individual's feedback and improve their services where possible. Tourism businesses also need to understand the types of social media sites frequently used by tourists in different regions and to ensure that content regarding their attractions and services is posted on those sites for likely visitors to peruse. Marketers also need to come up with innovative social media strategies, which includes consumer-friendly interaction and complaints strategies should be developed for pre-travel, on-the-travel and post-travel stages of the customers.

### **Conclusion and areas of further research**

From the review of literature, it can be deduced that social media sites indeed tend to play an important role in tourism. From information search to trip planning and destination decision making social media, is continuing to play a key role. The literature review shows that the information search stage (pre-trip stage) and experience sharing stage (after trip stage) are the most pre-dominant stages in which travellers use social media sites. Sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and TripAdvisor are the most used sites by travellers during trip planning and Instagram is also emerging as a popular social media site used for trip planning and destination choice. Tourism marketers are recommended to understand the behaviour of tourists on these online environments so that they will be able to make some strategic decision when crafting social media marketing strategies. The study focused only on reviewing previous literature, future studies can focus on using data from the supply side to ascertain whether tourist actually use social media sites to search for tourism destinations as well as the related travel activities.

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