

Use and Impact of Online Travel Reviews

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Abstract

Consumer-generated content (CGC) is growing in importance. Especially online travel reviews written by consumers are ever more available and used to inform travel-related decisions. A Web-based survey of users of the most prominent travel review site, TripAdvisor, was conducted to investigate how other travellers' reviews inform the trip planning process. Since current CGC statistics show generational and gender differences, the study also aimed at examining whether those carry over into the realm of travel review use. The results show that reviews are used mostly to inform accommodation decisions and are currently not used much for en route travel planning. Gender differences were found for perceived impacts of reviews, with females reaping greater benefits from using reviews, especially in terms of enjoyment and idea generation. Age differences occurred across a variety of perceptions and use behaviours. Implications for travel marketing and travel information systems design are provided.

Keywords: online travel reviews; consumer generated content; trip planning; age differences; gender differences.

1 Introduction

Through the Internet, individuals can make their thoughts and opinions easily available to a global community of Internet users (Dellarocas, 2003), and a growing number of users actively takes advantage of this opportunity. A total of 35 percent of US Internet users publish their thoughts or otherwise create content online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006a). Even more Internet users use consumer-generated content (CGC). According to eMarketer (2007a), about 75.2 million online users use CGC today in the US, and this number is expected to grow to 101 million by 2011.

Searching for travel-related information is one of the most popular online activities (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006b) and travellers are expected to increasingly take advantage of such content. Indeed, a growing use of online travel referrals for the purpose of planning travel has been reported by several travel-related studies (Bonn, Furr & Susskind, 1999; MacKay, McVetty & Vogt, 2005). Further, such electronic word of mouth (eWOM) can even have a significant influence on travel-related decisions after they have been made. eMarketer (2007b) reports that among travellers who use peer reviews for their hotel booking, 25% of infrequent

leisure travellers and 33% of frequent travellers report having changed a hotel stay based on reviews by other consumers.

However, little is known about the specific relevance of eWOM in different stages of travel planning and for specific types of travel-related decisions. Consequently, a study was conducted to investigate how eWOM sources, specifically online reviews provided by other travellers, are used for the various facets of travel planning.

2 Background

2.1 Use of Word of Mouth in Travel Planning

Word of mouth (WOM) communication refers to interpersonal communication among consumers concerning their personal experiences with a firm or a product (Richins, 1983). Previous studies illustrate the significance of WOM for consumers' purchase decisions (Bone, 1995; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Engel, Blackwell & Kegerreis, 1969; Arndt, 1967), especially within a service context (Murray, 1991; Murray & Schlacter, 1990). Because service products are intangible and cannot be easily described, consumers tend to rely on word of mouth from an experienced source to lower perceived risk and uncertainty (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Murray, 1991; Olshavsky & Granbois, 1979).

Word-of-mouth information search is greater in circumstances when a consumer is unfamiliar with a service provider (Chatterjee, 2001), which is often the case for travel-related decisions. WOM has long been recognized as one of the important external information sources for travel planning (Crofts, 1999; Murphy, Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2007; Hwang et al., 2006; Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2006; Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993; Fodness & Murray, 1997). Hanlan and Kelly (2005) found that word of mouth and independent information sources are the key media through which respondents formed their image of an iconic Australian tourist destination. As the use of the Internet for travel planning becomes ever more prevalent, travel decision-making processes are expected to become increasingly influenced by eWOM. Online word-of-mouth differs significantly from its offline form in that it includes many-to-many communication between communicators who do not necessarily share any social ties and that it is much more voluminous (Chatterjee, 2001). Consumer opinion-platforms have established themselves as important venues for eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

2.2 Consumer Reviews

Consumer-generated content encompasses a variety of media forms and types of Web sites (Gretzel, 2006). One form in which content is created online is as consumer reviews and ratings. Consumer reviews and ratings are the most accessible and prevalent form of eWOM (Chatterjee, 2001). Over 30 percent of Internet users have rated products online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006a). Forrester

(2006a) reports that about 70 percent of adults currently use consumer product ratings and reviews. Consumer reviews serve two distinct roles: 1) they provide information about products and services; and, 2) they serve as recommendations (Park, Lee & Han, 2007). Consumer reviews are perceived as particularly influential because they are written from a consumer's perspective and, thus, provide an opportunity for indirect experience (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). They are also perceived as more credible than information provided by marketers (Smith, Menon & Sivakumar, 2005).

Online consumer reviews appear to play an increasing role in consumer decision-making processes. More than 80% of web shoppers said they use other consumers' reviews when making purchasing decisions (Forrester, 2006b). eMarketer (2007c) reports that nearly six out of ten consumers prefer Web sites with peer-written reviews, and that Web sites with reviews experience greater conversion rates. A study conducted by Bazaarvoice (2007) indicates that for about 75% of US shoppers it is extremely or very important to read customer reviews before making a purchase. The sample also shows a clear preference for peer reviews over expert reviews. Smith, et al. (2005) also found that recommendations provided by online peers are preferred over editorial recommendations.

Consumers tend to rely more on consumer reviews when purchasing high involvement products (Park, Kim & Han, 2007); since travel is a high involvement product, one can expect extensive use of reviews for travel-related decisions. Indeed, Compete, Inc (2006) found that nearly 50% of travel purchasers visited a message board, forum, or online community for their online travel purchasing and one in three of these buyers said that consumer reviews helped with their purchase decision. Importantly, almost half of those whose purchasing decision was influenced by consumer reviews said that consumers' opinions actually caused them to change their mind about what they purchased. Moreover, among those buyers, 25% said they also posted a review on a consumer review site after making their purchase. Clearly, online consumer-generated information is taking on an important role in online travelers' decision making.

2.3 Travel Planning and Decision Making

Planning a trip involves a "temporal, dynamic, successive, and multistage contingent decision process" (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002:15). Information needs and information search strategies can be assumed to vary for different stages in the travel decision-making process (Gretzel, Fesenmaier & O'Leary, 2006). Also, travel planning involves a multitude of facets for which decisions need to be made. Extent of planning and timing of the decision differs for these various facets (Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000). While past research has extensively looked at factors influencing information source use (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004), little is known about the role of specific sources in particular planning stages and with respect to particular sub-decisions. Consequently, it was the goal of this study to investigate the importance of consumer reviews in different stages of planning and for different trip facets to be planned.

2.4 Age and Gender Differences

Gender differences have been found for Web usage in general (Sanchez-Franco, 2006) and online travel information search in particular (Kim, Lehto & Morrison, 2007). Research also suggests that women are more likely to engage in WOM behavior, and female Internet users have been found to be more likely influenced by recommendations received from friends than marketer-based information (eMarketer, 2007d). Further, differences exist for different age groups. Young consumers (millennials or Generation Y) are more likely to be influenced by WOM, with 85 percent of them indicating that they primarily learned about new products through WOM (eMarketer, 2007e). In general, WOM conversations are more likely to happen online for Generation Y consumers (eMarketer, 2007f). Differences in the use of information sources driven by age have also been reported in the tourism literature. For instance, Fodness & Murray (1997) as well as Fall & Knutson (2001) and Patterson (2007) report that WOM is particularly important for older travellers. Thus, it appears that use of consumer reviews for travel planning and the impact of such reviews on travel-related decisions might differ for travellers based on their gender and age.

3 Methodology

Currently, a number of travel-related CGC sites are available such as TripAdvisor.com, Virtualtourist.com, Wayn.com and Igougo.com. Among those CGC sites, TripAdvisor is the most prominent online travel review platform in terms of use and content available. As of September 1, 2007, it featured over 10 million travel reviews and over 750,000 photos posted by travelers (TripAdvisor.com, 2007). It attracts over 24 million visitors a month and has over 5 million registered users. Thus, a Web-based survey in collaboration with TripAdvisor.com was administered during a 4 week period between January 5 and January 31, 2007. The sample was drawn from the TripAdvisor traveller panel. This panel is maintained by TripAdvisor.com and includes TripAdvisor users mostly from the US but also Canada, the UK and Australia. Consumers who work in or live with someone who works in market research, advertising, marketing, media/news, or public relations are excluded from participation in the panel. Also, the sample used for the study included only consumers who had taken pleasure trips in the previous year and/or anticipated taking pleasure trips the following year. A drawing for one of two \$100 Amazon.com gift certificates was used as an incentive. A total of 7000 randomly selected panellists received an email invitation to complete the Web-based survey and 1480 actually participated, resulting in a 21.1 percent response rate.

Since the goal of the study presented in this paper was to investigate when and how other travellers' reviews are used in the trip planning process and what the perceived benefits of those reviews are, the survey included 29 questions regarding trip planning, use and impact of online travel reviews and general Internet use behaviour questions as well as questions regarding demographic characteristics. All questions

regarding reviews referred to travel reviews written by consumers rather than travel experts. The results presented in the paper were obtained using descriptive analyses of the data, while age and gender differences were analyzed using Chi-Square statistics.

4 Results

4.1 Profile of Sample

More females (64%) than males (36%) completed the survey. Most respondents (79%) reported being married or living with a partner. A majority of respondents (78.5%) reported having children under 17 living in their household. The largest age group was comprised of those who are between 50 and 64 years old (42.8%). Only 2.2 percent are between 18 and 25 years old, 14.4 percent between 26 and 34 years, 34.1 percent between 35 and 49 years and 6.5 percent 65 years or older. Over 69 percent have a college or post graduate degree. The majority (52.2%) has an annual household income of \$90,000 or greater. These results were compared to the characteristics of the overall panel membership and no differences were found.

About 26 percent report having taken 1-2 pleasure trips and 38 percent report having taken 3-4 pleasure trips in the 12 months prior to the survey, while 36 percent took 5 trips or more. Almost 45 percent of the survey respondents typically begin their trip planning four or more months in advance. Nearly 30 percent plan 2-4 months in advance, about 20 percent plan 3-8 weeks in advance. About 4 percent plan 1-3 weeks in advance, just over 1 percent plan 1-6 days in advance, and only 0.4 percent plan during their trips.

Since the sample consists of TripAdvisor users, the respondents are clearly more inclined to use the Internet than a general population of travellers. Over 84 percent report that they are very skilled at using the Internet. Almost all (96.4%) use the Internet when planning pleasure trips. They are also frequent users of the Internet for travel planning. Over 82 percent use the Internet always and 13.5 percent use it often to plan at least some aspects of a pleasure trip. Of those who use the Internet to plan pleasure trips, 90 percent look at materials posted by consumers when planning pleasure trips, 64.2 percent read travel-related blogs, 27.7 percent watch videos online and only 6.6 percent listen to travel-related audio files/podcasts in the travel planning process.

4.2 Perceptions and Use of Online Travel Reviews

Not surprisingly, given the characteristics of the sample, 97.7 percent of the respondents who use the Internet for travel planning say they have read other travellers' reviews in the process of planning a pleasure trip. Of those who read other travellers' reviews, 57.8 percent do so every time they plan a pleasure trip while 26.1

percent read them very often. Over 10 percent read reviews frequently, 5.3 percent regularly, and only 0.2 percent rarely.

Most online review readers look for other travellers' reviews on virtual community sites (92.3%), followed by travel guidebook sites (60.6%), online travel agency/auction sites (58.1%) and search engines or portals (51.5%). Not so many (44.6%) look for reviews on local destination Web sites and state tourism Web sites (29.7%). Only 27.9 percent look for reviews on company sites and 13.4 percent on meta-travel search engines.

Online travel review readers use reviews to inform different stages of their pleasure trip planning. Most (64.7%) use other travellers' reviews in the middle of the planning process, to narrow down choices. But many also use reviews to get inspired at the beginning of their pleasure trip planning process (63.7%). Other travellers' online reviews are also important in later stages to confirm decisions. Almost 41 percent of travel review readers use them in this stage. Interestingly, for almost a third (29.5%) of the travel review readers, reviews are also important in the post-consumption phase to compare notes with others and share experiences. Only 8.7 percent use reviews to inform decisions during a trip.

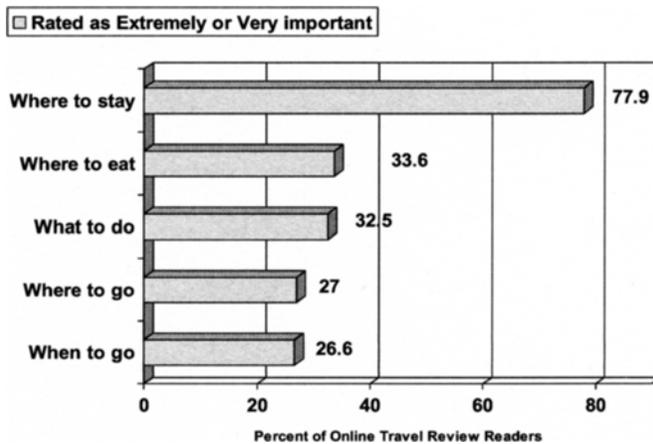


Figure 1. Importance of Travel Reviews for Travel-Related Decisions

Travel review readers perceive reviews posted by other consumers as having several advantages over information from travel service providers. Almost two thirds (65.3%) of the review readers think other travellers' reviews are more likely to contain up-to-date information, enjoyable information (61.2%) and reliable information (61.1%). Over half of the respondents perceive them also as more likely to contain detailed information (57.4%) and relevant information (53.6%).

Most TripAdvisor users (77.9%) who actively read other travellers' reviews in their pleasure trip planning process think that reviews are extremely or very important to decide where to stay. About a third think that reviews are important for restaurant decisions (33.6%) and activity decisions (32.5%). Not so many review readers consider reviews to be important for destination-related decisions (27.0%) or the timing of trips (26.6%) (see Figure 1).

4.3 Influence of Online Travel Reviews

Survey respondents were further asked to indicate in what ways the reviews posted by other travellers influenced their travel planning. The results are presented in Table 1. Almost all review readers think that reviews are a good way to learn about travel destinations and products (94.6%), help with the evaluation of alternatives (91.9%), help them avoid places/services they would not enjoy (91.8%) and provide them with ideas (90.3%).

A clear majority of the review readers also thinks that reviews increase confidence and help reduce risk by making it easier to imagine what a place will be like. Reviews are also perceived as helping with making the decision process more efficient in that they make decisions easier because they reduce the likelihood of later regretting a decision. Although less prominent than the other areas of influence, reading travel reviews also makes the planning process more enjoyable. However, not so many respondents think that reading reviews saves them time.

4.4 Gender Differences

Despite the gender differences reported in general CGC use, the analyses did not show any significant differences in terms of use except for the use of online travel agency sites to find reviews and for the perception of reviews in terms of providing detailed information. More females (60.8%) than males (53.5%) look for travel reviews on online travel agency sites ($\chi^2=7.15$; $p<0.01$). Slightly more females (59.1%) than males (54.3%) think other travellers' reviews are more likely to contain detailed information ($\chi^2=6.53$; $p<0.05$).

However, gender differences were found for the impact of travel reviews on different aspects of decision-making. Females (83.4%) are more likely than males (77.9%) to agree or strongly agree that other travellers' reviews make it easier to reach decisions ($\chi^2=18.10$; $p<0.01$). They are also slightly more likely to think that reviews help them save time (69.6% compared to 65.2%; $\chi^2=14.65$; $p<0.01$). Females (83.3%) are slightly more likely than males (80.7%) to agree or strongly agree that reviews reduce risk/uncertainty ($\chi^2=15.39$; $p<0.01$). Females are also more likely to perceive hedonic value; 81.9 percent (compared to 67.5% males) think reviews make them feel more excited about travelling ($\chi^2=56.75$; $p<0.01$) and 80 percent (compared to 70.3% for males) think they add fun to the travel planning process ($\chi^2=31.58$; $p<0.01$).

Table 1. Influence of Other Travellers' Reviews

Other Travellers' Reviews...	% of Travel Review Readers Who Strongly Agree or Agree
Are a good way to learn about a travel destination, product or service	94.6
Help me evaluate alternatives	91.9
Help me avoid places/services I would not enjoy	91.8
Provide me with ideas	90.3
Increase my confidence in the decisions I make	86.6
Make it easier to imagine what a place will be like	85.3
Reduce the risk/uncertainty involved in making travel decisions	82.4
Make it easier to reach decisions	81.3
Help me plan my trips more efficiently	80.2
Reduce the likelihood that I will later regret a decision	77.6
Make travel planning more enjoyable	77.4
Make me feel excited about travelling	76.8
Add fun to the travel planning process	76.5
Help me save time in the travel planning process	68.0
Help me imagine my trips more vividly	67.4

Differences occur also for impacts regarding imagination and inspiration. Females (71.7%) are clearly more likely than males (57.6%) to think that reviews help them imagine trips more vividly ($\chi^2=34.85$; $p<0.01$). More females (86.5%) than males (83.2%) indicate that reviews make it easier to imagine what a place will be like ($\chi^2=30.21$; $p<0.01$). Small differences were also found for idea generation and learning; 91.1 percent of females and 88.8 percent of males see reviews as providing travel ideas ($\chi^2=15.17$; $p<0.01$) and 95.1 percent of females compared to 93.7 percent of males think reviews are a good way to learn about a place ($\chi^2=30.18$; $p<0.01$).

4.5 Age Differences

Several interesting differences regarding use and perceptions of reviews were found for different age groups. For instance, those 65 years or older are less likely to have read other travellers' reviews ($\chi^2=28.21$; $p<0.01$). Older respondents are also less likely to use reviews every time they plan a pleasure trip (32.2% compared to 63.3% for those between 18 and 34 years of age; $\chi^2=45.06$; $p<0.01$). Younger travel review readers are more likely to use reviews in the middle of the trip planning process to narrow down alternatives (80% of 18-25 year olds compared to 55.2% of those 65 or over; $\chi^2=15.51$; $p<0.01$). Very young travellers (18-25 years) are also clearly more likely to use reviews during their trips (23.3% compared to 8% of those 65 or over; $\chi^2=11.16$; $p<0.05$).

Older travel review readers are more likely to look for reviews on company sites (39.1% compared to 23.3% of those between 18 and 25; $\chi^2=15.92$; $p<0.01$). The 65 years and older group is also the most likely to use search engines to look for travel reviews (58.6% compared to 47.2% of those between 35 and 49; $\chi^2=10.13$; $p<0.05$). In addition, older travel review readers are more likely to look for reviews on state tourism sites (41.4% compared to 13.3% of those between 18 and 25; $\chi^2=18.61$; $p<0.01$). The same pattern can be seen for local destination Web sites (57.5% of those 65 and older vs. 40% of those between 18 and 25 years old; $\chi^2=12.79$; $p<0.01$). In contrast, younger readers are clearly more likely to look for reviews on virtual community sites (96.7% of those between 18 and 25 in contrast to 86.2% of those 65 or older; $\chi^2=11.33$; $p<0.05$).

Younger travellers find reviews more important for deciding where to stay (90% compared to 60.9% for those 65 or older; $\chi^2=44.13$; $p<0.01$). Older review readers are more likely to find reviews unimportant for deciding when to go (47.1% compared to 33.3% for those between 18 and 25; $\chi^2=29.73$; $p<0.01$). Also, those 65 years of age or older are less likely to believe that reviews provide more up-to-date ($\chi^2=19.25$; $p<0.01$), detailed ($\chi^2=21.03$; $p<0.01$) and reliable ($\chi^2=29.09$; $p<0.01$) information.

Reviews are more likely to increase confidence for younger review readers (86.7% compared to 72.4% of those 65 and older; $\chi^2=58.66$; $p<0.01$). The same pattern was found for risk reduction; while 86.6% of those between 18 and 25 agreed or strongly agreed that reviews reduced uncertainty, this was the case for only 74.7% of those 65 years of age or older ($\chi^2=46.01$; $p<0.01$). Younger review readers also experience more excitement from reviews (86.7% compared to 76.8% for those 65 or older; $\chi^2=38.87$; $p<0.01$).

5 Conclusion

The survey results provide interesting insights regarding online travel review readers. They are highly educated, have high incomes, travel rather frequently, use the Internet extensively and plan in advance. Thus, travel review readers, and specifically TripAdvisor users, appear to be a very important target market for travel marketers. The study results also confirm that travel review readers perceive reviews posted by other consumers as superior to marketer information, especially as far as being up-to-date, reliability and enjoyability are concerned. Importantly, those who read other travellers' reviews do so frequently and mostly on virtual community and travel guidebook sites. This indicates that partnerships with virtual community and travel content providers are important for destination marketers.

The findings clearly show differences in the use of online reviews for different trip planning stages and trip facets. Travel reviews are not only used in the decisive stages of trip planning to narrow down choices but also for idea generation. However, they are clearly underused for en route decision-making. Thus, making other travellers' reviews more accessible through mobile applications seems to be an important goal. Also, most review readers currently perceive reviews as important for accommodation

decisions. This is not surprising as most reviews are encouraged for hotels and other accommodation establishments. One can expect that the perceived usefulness for other decisions would increase if more reviews were available for those aspects. It is fairly easy to encourage accommodation reviews as most travellers have to provide an email address when booking a room online. Hotels as well as online travel agencies typically send an email to travellers after their stay, asking them to provide a review. Different models to provide incentives for destination-, restaurant-, activities- and timing-related reviews are needed.

The results further suggest that travel reviews play an important role in the trip planning process for those who actively read them. They provide ideas, make decisions easier, add fun to the planning process and increase confidence by reducing risk and making it easier to imagine what places will be like. Especially female travel planners seem to benefit greatly from the use of travel reviews. While gender differences were almost exclusively found for impacts on the trip planning process, generational differences occurred across a variety of perceptions and use behaviours. These results confirm the importance of considering demographic variables when modelling information search behaviour.

These conclusions are not only important for travel marketers and researchers but also for system designers. Given the importance and many positive benefits of travel reviews for travel planners, systems have to be designed in a way to not only make travel reviews ubiquitously available but also to make it easy for travellers to provide reviews. Also, rather than sitting on specialized sites, reviews should be seamlessly integrated with other content such as maps and videos to make travel planning more efficient.

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