Social Media in Travel Decision Making Process

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Abstract

Travel and tourism is one of the most promising sectors in the world, and information is extremely important in this industry. These days, the way of traveler in utilizing this information throughout their travel decision making process has changed. The broad development of Information and Communication Technology especially in tourism industry is one of the factor which made this change happened. It is mainly associated with the emergence of social media as one of the Web 2.0 platform, which offers interactivity to users. The purpose of this study was to find out the travel decision-making process through the use of social media especially from the point of view of Indonesian traveler community members. The theoretical background in this study is based on the concept of consumer behavior, specifically the theory of travel buying behavior and also on the concept of the usage of information on social media. Data was collected through interviews with traveler community's members "Backpacker Indonesia". This community's members were chosen based on the results of the observation of the communication and interaction occurred in community's sites.The main result of this study shows that social media has an important role as source of information to help the traveler in every stage of travel decisionmaking, and at each step, the traveler is using information in carrying out all activities undertaken. The study concluded some recommendations for the scope of academics and theoretical with the model of travel decision making process through the use of social media, as well as for the tourism industry to execute marketing strategies that more focus on the consumers.

Keyword: Consumer Behavior, Travel Decision Making Process, Social Media, Information and Communications Technology

1. Introduction

Internet has a vital role in shifting the way of people communicating, working and doing business. The usage of the Internet later became broader supported by the evolution of traditionally static sites (Web 1.0) that has shifting to interactive-based sites (Web 2.0). Through these interactive-based sites, people as a social creature using Internet to expressing their selves in a new form of communication, that is online communication (Funk, 2009 p.xv). Mark Poster (1995), in his book *The Second Media Age*, marked a new period where communication and interactive technology especially in virtual world able to change the society. This new media is known with its more interactive nature and the ability to create new comprehension about personalized communication (Littlejohn dan Foss, 2008, p.291-292).*Web 2.0* can be a media with the great influence to the people related to the user generated content it offers. In another word, through the Web 2.0 the sharing experience activity from one person to another become one of the main influential factor in the decision making process especially in term of the consumer behavior. The more interactive web pages facilitate the users to communicating in online community, forum, chat rooms and any other social media platform (Rodriguez, 2009, p.18).

This interactivity facilitated by the Web 2.0 not only speaks about messaging feature, furthermore, these interactivity features in Web 2.0 are now able to facilitating users to write down the comments as well as opinion, upload and tagging pictures, video, listening to sounds and music, having online conference, collaborating, and also visiting virtual 3D world in online games (Funk, 2009, p.2). Those features are now being implemented in travel and tourism industry since one of the main important elements in that sector is the huge amount of information needed by the tourist. Information is being used as one of the most important foundation to build trust throughout the travel decision-making process, specifically to minimalizing risks from the complex-characterized products/services (Buhalis, in Rodriguez, 2009, p.3).

Implementation of technology in travel and tourism industry has triggering the emergence of Travel 2.0 concept. The main point of this concept is about the travel and tourism industry that is currently facing the new consumers, who are more information-literated because the easy access to real experiences of the other consumers. Tourism business is facing a new change, from business to consumer, to peer-to-peer business and communications form (Miguéns, Baggio, and Costa, 2008, p.2).Real evidence about this matters can be seen from the emergence of traveler community, either offline-based or online-based in many social media such as blog, facebook, forum, and so on. This is same with what Berners-Lee said, this medium is place where everyone can meet, read, and write (Milano, Baggio, dan Piattelli, 2011, p.2).Communities formed of the same interests, especially those in the scope of travel and tourism in Indonesia showed an increasing trend, both in terms of the existence of the community itself and also the members who joined the communities. Traveler community, as Goeldner and Ritchie (2012) mentioned, as a group of people, sometimes with a common interest (if only in travel), who have formed travel organizations for their mutual benefit. For example, some purchase an aircraft and then arrange trips for their members (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012, p. 249).Inherent characteristics of the traveler community is very close to the characteristics possessed by the "new travelers", which became increasingly have control and become a major player in the process of creating and shaping the brand experience. With these characteristics, traveler is often seen as individual rather than as a community or group, even though they are traveling with a particular group or community. Similar to this point of view, Wellman outlined that the decisions made related to tourism activities is an individual decision, not the decision of the group (Wellman, 2008, 51)."Backpacker Indonesia" as one of the biggest traveler community in Indonesia, has been exists since September 2009. With about 47.842 people spread throughout Indonesia and some other countries, and in the last three months the site also had as many as 557.354 visitors (www.backpackerindonesia.com, 2016). In this online community, traveler can become members to interact, collaborate and share information with other community members. Such activities can be done through discussion forums and blogs. Through Backpackerindonesia.com site, traveler can share information about traveling activities, tourist destination, as well as the accommodation and transportation. Researches and scientific studies has been done in several countries within the last five years, such as Austria, Portugal, New Zealand, United States, Greece, and Spain, it all shows how the related subject is now become one of the most important and interesting research topic globally. And according to this phenomenon, this study was conducted to determine how the Indonesia's traveler community members have their travel decision-making process using social media in order to create a broader understanding associated with the travel behavior and information and communication technology.

2. Social Media as Communication Platform in Digital Era

Tim O'Reilly (2005) states that current society is in life in the second phase of the internet's development. It is the phase called the second phase of *"Web 2.0"* Since the time, the *Web* is considered as a platform where the users are not in the passive position but able to create and produce a variety of content and services (Rodriguez, 2009, p.18).The *Web 2.0* is a social transformation, so interactivity and control have been given to the users more than that in the previous one. Not only it is useful to the Web page owner but also to the users in general. Like stated by Funk (2009) that interactivity is the important attribute in the emergence of the *Web 2.0* (Funk, 2009, p.2). The interactivity facilitated in *Web 2.0* does not only talk about message sending feature but also other features such as writing comments and opinion, uploading and tagging photos, making videos, listening sound, doing online conference as well as playing online 3D games (Funk, 2009, p.2). Social media is an application with the *Web 2.0* basis presenting interactive website. With the interactive facility in the website, it can make the users to build relationship with others (*peer to peer*) in a kind of information exchange on experiences, opinion as well as ideas on products either goods or services.

However, the concept of social media has many different terms and references, and the most are used alternately; therefore, some experts agree that the terminology on the social does not meet the truly definition yet (Cox *et al*., 2009; Dippelreiter *et al*., 2008; Fotis, Rossides & Buhalis, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010, in Faria and Elliot, 2012, p.194). Some academicians and professionals among others as Blackshaw (2006), McCann (2008), Safko and Brake (2009), and Kaplan and Haenlin (2010) have build definitions that can review all essences of social media. The main essence of social media is concerning interaction, collaboration and content sharing among the users. In simpler way, social media is intended as the *Web 2.0*application and platform that the users can upload and share information they have to others.

The content uploaded by the users if we refer to the term used by the *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development* (OECD, 2007) as the *User Created Content (UCC)*, i.e. a variety of content uploaded via internet in a kind of text, auditory, visual or mixed and it is the results of creative jobs from the internet users and professional such as writers, publishers, journalists, licensed broadcasters and companies (OECD, 2007, p.17-18).

3. Travel 2.0

The term *Travel 2.0* refers to the evolution occurred in the sector of tourism (*Travel 2.0*) as the impact of technologicaladvancement particularly information and communication technology. The term itself mentioned by Philip Wolf comes from the *Web 2.0* application in the sector of tourism (Miguéns, Baggio, dan Costa, 2008, p.2).As the main point of the *Travel 2.0* concept concerning the description that the tourism industry is and will encounter "new customers", i.e. customers with greater control and information literacy, it makes easy access to a variety of experiences that other customers have encountered in the past. The *Travel 2.0* (the tourism version of the *Web 2.0*) provides a multiple of important features and control to tourists and these are able to influence image and business of the tourism destination, companies as well as organizations in the sector (Milano, Baggio, dan Piattelli, 2011, p.2). Information and communication technological advancement, the improvement of social welfare and changes in values and life styles have directed the emergence of new customers for tourism products. Such customers having been described at above, has greater control to their decision making process. It is stated by Poon (1993) that new customers of tourism products are those who have more informed, more independent, more individualistic and more involved (Gretzel, Fesenmaier dan O'Leary dalam Buhalis & Costa, 2006, p. 9-10). Information access that new tourists have particularly occurs for the facilities from internet technology. Rifkin, 2000; Windham and Orton (2000) state that new tourists get empowerment from internet that on the other hand provides cheap and easy access to a multiple of information sources and a variety of community. The internet also provides personalization features to each user, and the customers expect that marketers can see and fulfill their personal preferences. New tourists become more controllable and main players in the development and establishment of trademarks and experiences (Gretzel, Fesenmaier dan O'Leary in Buhalis & Costa, 2006, p. 10). Specifically to understand tourism behavior today and future, there are at least three main role of new tourists to do their travel, i.e. (1) travellers are those who become new technological users, (2) travellers are those who become co-producers of the impressive experiences, and (3) travellers are *Storytellers* (Gretzel, Fesenmaier dan O'Leary dalam Buhalis dan Costa, 2006, p.10).

4. Decision Making for Tourism

Moreover, when defining concepts in tourism, the important point we should pay attention is that the concepts discuss customers' activities. Tourism, particularly recreation and vacation, is an activity decided by the customers independently McCabe, 2009, p.4). Therefore, it can be stated that a main focus in tourism is the discussion on customer behavior. Study on customer behavior grows when the marketing concepts have been applied in many companies. Since the beginning of the emergence until the development, the customer behavior study gets influence from multiple scientific perspectives. The complexity of the customer behavior stimulates the study in its development to require other sciences that are able to explain the customer behavior concepts in better way. The sciences related to the customer behavior study among others are Sociology, Antropology, Psychology and Economics (Suryani, 2008, p.9).The field of customer behavior is the study of individuals, groups or organizations and processes they use to select, decide, use as well as post-use of a product, service, experience as well as idea to meet the demand and impact of the process to customers and society (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).The decision making of customers is scope of study on the customer behavior. It can be seen in a research perspective on the customer behavior of services. It states that researchers see customers as the decision makers.

From the perspective, the purchasing is result in which a customer has some problem and then through rational process he/she solves the problem. The perspective describesthat a customer definitely does a series of steps when he/she carries out purchasing activities. The steps include the identification of problem, search, alternative evaluation, selection and evaluation after the purchasing. Root of the perspective is cognitive and psychological experiencesand other economic factors (Umar, 2003). Specifically the use of information through social media as stated by McCann (2008) occurs in a kind of interaction, collaboration and content sharing. The development of the concepts can be described in Picture 1:

Picture 1: Decision Making of Tourism Through Uses of Social Media
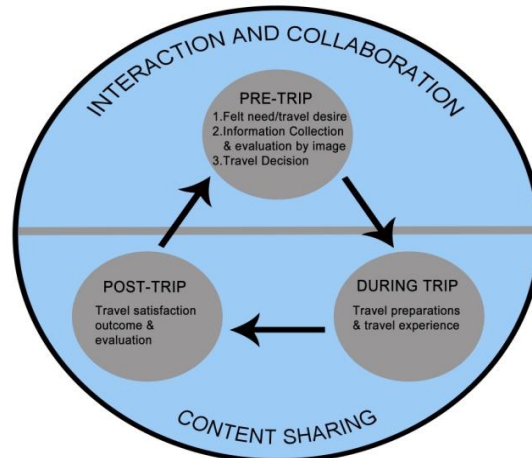
Adapted from Travel Decision Making Model (Mathieson & Wall, 1982) and Activities of Information Use in Social Media (McCann, 2008)The model in Picture 1 describes social media uses in the decision making of tourism. As having been explained previously that customer's decision making on tourism products are divided into three phases: before, when and after the travel. In detail it can be explained further as follows:

- *Pre-Trip Phase*, i.e. the phase that someone faces before he/she does a traveling. It consists of: (1) The introduction of demands/wants to do a traveling, (2) The gathering of information and evaluation on the basis of product image and tourism activities as a whole, such as tourism destination, activities that can be carried out in the location, the best time to do traveling and how to reach the intended tourism destination, and (3) The travel decision making and it includes the purchasing of some products that should be carried out before the traveling, such as airline tickets, booking of hotel rooms.
- *During Trip Phase*, i.e. the phase that the travellers are undergoing tourism experiences and it includes the consumption of products in the scope of the tourism, such as accommodation, transportation, attraction andfood. It also includes searching additional information required around the scope of the tourism products when they are in one area.
- *Post-Trip Phase*, the phase when a series of travel activities have been accomplished. In short it can be stated that it is the phase when the travellers have been back home again from their travelling. In the phase their experiences are evaluated and the travellers can conclude the satisfaction rate whether they have to some products, activities as a whole as well as the sources of information as the basis of decision made during the traveling process. And from the evaluation it will influence the next tourism behavior. It depends on the satisfaction rate they feel, the travellers will save the memory of their experiences to do another travel activities in future.

5. Methodology

The approach in the research is definitely a qualitative approach. The phenomenon of social media uses particularly in the travel decison making is decided to be the focus of the research. Moreover, the phenomenon is integrated to the related theories on the customer behavior and those on new media. More specific understanding is built from the theoretical development and it is the collaboration of specific theories. Therefore, the theoretical development can be summed up in the model the research uses, i.e. the model of travel decision making through social media uses. Primary data in the research comes from the interviewing of informants and population interaction (the members of the traveller community, "Backpacker Indonesia").

The data collection method in the research is carried out in two ways, i.e. open-ended interview and observation. The reason of choosing interview relates to the role of informants. They are considered important in the research because they can give information on something in the research subject and they can give suggestion on other sources of evidence supporting the existing data as well as they can develop access to the related sources. Moreover, the second data collection method in the research is carried out in a kind of direct observation and participant observation. Specifically, when carrying out direct and participant observation in the research, the researcher does: (1) Direct observation, i.e. by observing interaction among the community members in social media particularly on "Backpacker Indonesia" website.

The observation is carried out by opening access to the community website of Backpacker Indonesia by utilizing "*tracking*" features for each informants; (2) Participant observation, i.e. the researcher joins in "Backpacker Indonesia" community and some interactions occur with the members. The subject in the research is the members of the traveller community, "Backpacker Indonesia." Concerning the category of selecting subject in the research, it includes: (1) Users of new media, (2) Travellers, (3) New Tourists, and (3) Active members of traveller community in Indonesia.

6. Results and Discussion

Social media acts as a primary source of information in all stages of traveler's travel decision making. The process includes planning, usage, and a review of tourism products, and information is one of the main elements throughout this processes. The important role of information in the travel decision-making process not only appears in the information collection stage. Information exists and plays an important part also in every other stage. The information referred here is information that is created and uploaded by other users, which is also called as User Created Content (UCC).Social media as a platform and application that allows users to upload and share UCC has been one of the main media that is accessible to help and "escort" the entire decision-making process undertaken by the travelers. This research findings show how traveler use information in social media; (1) in pre-trip stage traveler utilizing UCC on social media through some form of stages; responding, collecting, evaluating, and confirming, (2) in during-trip stage traveler enriching the information, and (3) in post-trip they tend to do sharing information to the other community members. The detail process of utilization of the information can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1: Travel decision making process and utilization of information in social mediaby member of "Backpacker Indonesia"

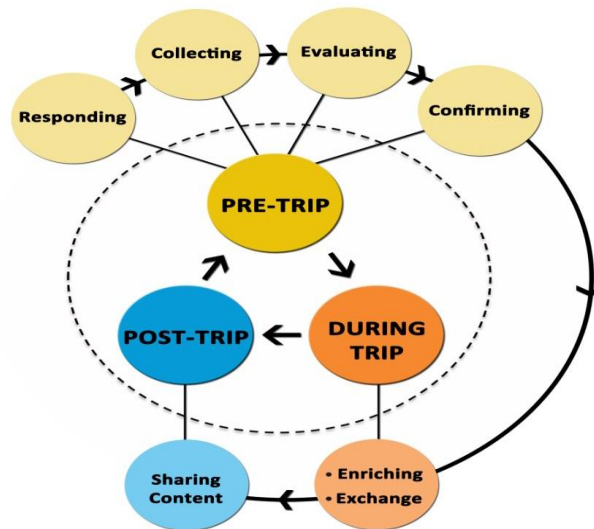| No	TRAVEL DECISION MAKING PROCESS	UTILIZATION OF INFORMATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA
	PRE TRIP	
1.	Need/desire to travel	Responding social media content about travel activities in text, picture, video, and combination.
2.	Collecting information and alternative evaluation.	o Collecting information from media social about travel activities done by another people and also about travel products that will be used/consumed in the entire travel decision-making process. o Evaluating informations that has been collected to get the nearest picture about the condition of travel destination and also about the travel products that will be used/consumed.
3.	Decision-making	Confirming the belief and attitude about the information that has been evaluated to settle up the itinerary and product buying.
	DURING TRIP	
4.	Additional preparation and travel experience.	Enriching the additional information about specific things regarding to the travel destination, and exchange information through communication held with travel mate and other people
	POST-TRIP	
5.	Travel evaluation and satisfaction	Sharing evaluation's output about activities, products and information sources used.

In the early stages of pre-trip, specifically in stage of recognizing the travel needs / desires, the informant responding to UCC in social media as a stimuli that assist them in recognizing the need or desire to perform travel activities. The informant access content on social media as a daily activity, and when accessing social media with content on tourism, the informant response to the contents by looking at pictures, watching videos, or reading text. Such activities help the informants to identify or recognize the need and desire for travel, and also specifically to travel to certain destinations. In the next stage, travelers collect the information to be able to meet the needs / desires to travel. Information collection is a process by which consumers observed and surveyed its environment in order to obtain precise data as a basis for making the right decisions. At the stage of information collection, travelers looking for information on the activities carried out by others and also information about various tourism products that will be used / consumed on travel activities through various social media platforms as well as other websites. At the stage of information collection, the main requirements perceived by informants are adequacy and completeness of information, so that the informant ready to conduct the evaluation and selection of information as a basis for decisions regarding the travel activities.

After collecting information, the next stage is the alternative evaluation stage. Here the informant evaluating the information that has been obtained from various sources. In the evaluation of information phase, informant split between UCC and non-UCC to have the closest pictures about the actual circumstances of the tourist destination as well as the products that will be consumed / used. However, because the UCC can be very situational, which is very related to one's experience, traveler needs to collect more than one source of information to be evaluated. Review, comments, and ratings uploaded by other users, can help the evaluation process before traveler settling on a decision. After evaluating information, traveler moves to stage of decision-making. Here, they are confirming beliefs on the information that has been evaluated previously. The information is confirmed by making decisions about specific destinations and tourism products to be used along the travel activities. Decision-making is done by booking / purchasing online through the Internet. The most common purchase done via Internet is for transportation and accommodation products. By establishing this travel decision, traveler was ready to travel or enters the stage of "during trip" in his/her travel decision-making process.

At "during trip" stage, the activities carried out by the traveler is doing additional preparation and having the travel experience. While doing additional preparation, traveler is enriching information about products that might be needed in the area of tourism destination through social media. Due to the need of huge and quick information on stage "during-trip", it leds traveler to the interactive resources, or resources that can immediately provide an answer, for example by using specific keywords in the query.Also on stage "during trip", traveler also exchange UCC to others, this activity is included in stage travel experience conducted by them. "Exchange of information" is done by communicating with a companion or those who did not participate in the tourism activities. Content exchanged by travelers at this stage contains information about "eyewitness report" of the travel activities being carried out. In general, traveler posting status, uploading and tagging photos or location as well as receive feedback in a real time. Enriching information and exchanging the content on the stage "during trip", were activities that takes place simultaneously, in other words, one activity does not precede the other activity and vice versa. While in transit or when traveler have arrived at a tourist destination, they can use social media to enrich the additional information, and to directly exchange content with other people associated with trips being undertaken. This activity can also be done simultaneously, for example, content exchange activities carried out by traveler can also be a part of activities to enrich the tourism travel-related information. One example is when a traveler posting a status on social media, he/she can immediately receive feedback given by another traveler.At the post-trip stage, based on the results of the study found that after traveler returned from a traveling, they will do the "sharing content" activity, mainly the results of the travel experience evaluation that has passed through a variety of platforms/social media applications and also company's websites / agents which has social features. Through the websites of companies / agencies of tourism service providers, travelers provide feedback to the company or a marketer, so it can be accessed directly by other users and can be the basis for their travel decision making especially in purchasing specific products they would do. It shows that the traveler here acted as a co-creator who create content and share it to help others, especially those who have similar interests, ie to do traveling. The results of evaluation are shared with others on stage "post-trip", not just the evaluation of the experience and level of satisfaction with tourism products, but also the information resources that have been used throughout the travel decision-making process. In addition the results of this study also found that the travel decision-making process by the use of social media can be viewed more as a semi-circular process.

It can be seen from the statement of the traveler that the sources of information used in decision-making processes throughout traveling activities, perceived as important as the tourism products that are consumed/used in these activities. Travel decision-making process will be more complicated without the availability of information sources that can be accessed by the traveler adequately. Moreover, the sources of such information can even affect and determine the whole traveling activities. Evaluation of information sources not only happened at the stage where the traveler should collect the information, or about specific tourism products in particular. However, evaluation of resources is also done after the trip ends, at this stage, together with the evaluation of the tourism products, the traveler assess the credibility and accuracy of the information sources that have been used previously. If the evaluation results demonstrate the positive direction, travelers clearly stated that they would re-use the information sources to plan and lead a tourism activity in the future. This could happen if the information, which accessed by the informant has been evidenced directly in previous travel experience, or if the information sources successfully provide access to the right content proportion either for the information from a marketer/company and also also the content submitted by other users or consumers Though the results of this study demonstrate the travel decision-making process as a circular process, but the use of information in social media, especially those found in this study suggests a linear process. This is the basis for the claim that the travel decision-making process through the use of social media is a semi-circular process. That process can be seen in Figure 2:

Figure2. Social Media in Travel Decision Making Process

In the aforementioned model, it is found that the uses of information through social media in the travel decision making are a linear process in which the process consists of the structured phases. The phases start from response and these end in the information sharing, i.e. a travel decision making process.

7. Conclusion

Social media as a new platform gives opportunities for markets in tourism industry to carry out marketing strategies with more customer-focused. The complexity of the traveler behavior urges marketers to build and develop marketing strategies based on the understanding of the developing customer behavior. The research particularly can give input to the industry of tourism and other industries related on the understanding of customer behavior in current information era. The information and communication technological advancement has stimulated travellers to make greater control to the fulfillment of their demand. Therefore, current customers have changed from passive customers to more active ones. They do search information to meet their demand and it comes from wider sources if compared to that in the past. Social media becomes a promising media for current marketing communication strategies. It is because the media has become an unseparated part of modern society, and moreover because the customers consider that the *User Created Content* becomes more trusted content if compared to that from marketers or companies.

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