Credibility Perceptions of User Generated Content

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Abstract

Social media users generate a large volume of user generated content in various social media platforms to share their experiences in using a brand or a service. In the travel industry, the user generated content reviews are used by the prospective travellers to decide their travel plans. In the 1950’s credibility research of the media was started when television was introduced as a new media in the world dominated by newspapers. In the Social Media platforms, the credibility assessment is much more complex as the content could get disconnected from the original source of information as the information gets disseminated. The article reviews the credibility issues surrounding the user generated content very specific to the hospitality and tourism industry.

Keywords: Social Media, User Generated Content (UGC), eWord of Mouth (eWOM), Credibility

Introduction

The hospitality and tourism industry represents one of the industries impacted by the disruptive phenomenon of social media. The various social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, TripAdvisor, YouTube, to name a few, provide the travellers an interactive experience with their friends, colleagues, relatives and other social contacts. This allows them to share and exchange information, share their experiences in using a brand and/or a service and so on. Thus, travellers generate a vast amount of user generated content via the online platforms to share their experiences with others and help other travellers to support their travel decisions (Li and Liu, 2014)1. Travellers could rely on the user generated content to make their travel decisions including the travel destination, mode of travel, hotels and choosing the attractions to visit and so on. While virtual communities have existed since the last two decades, the emergence of Web 2.0 and the subsequent popularity of social media allows travellers to provide a feedback, rating, share their reviews and recommendations. It allows them to write a blog, share a video or photos as well as microblog their views and comments. This has led to an explosion in the quantum of user generated content available in the various social media platforms and applications.

Social Media and User Generated Content

A research done by Compete Inc. found that User Generated Content generates about USD 10 Billion a year in online travel bookings and more than 20 percent of the travellers rely on user generated content while booking their trips (Schmallegger and Carson 2008)2. Thus, Social Media is impacting how travellers search for information about tourist suppliers, travel destinations and allows them to share their experiences in platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Sigala et al., 2012)3.

The many forms of User Generated Content include opinions, sharing of information through blogs and microblogs, photos, videos, social bookmarking and sharing of information/knowledge in wikis.

While there were many surveys conducted on the popularity of user generated content for travel related information which includes Pew Internet and American Life Project 2006, Forrester Research (2006), a survey conducted in 2008 indicated that more than seventy four percent of the travellers use the comments and reviews of other consumers/users as information sources, while they plan their vacation trips (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008)4. The user reviews play an important role in shaping the opinion of prospective consumers. Other studies indicated that the influence of user reviews is particularly significant for experience goods (Klein, 1998)5, as their quality is virtually unknown before the consumption of goods (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Nelson, 1970) and consumers must rely on word of mouth or online reviews to decide on such goods. The products and services offered in the tourism and hospitality industry are experience goods, and as such, the quality of tour operations and hotels is known only after the service is consumed by the traveller. Hence, the user generated content plays a critical role in the context of travel planning (Litvin et al., 2008)8.

Buhalis & Law, 2008 stated that the internet has fundamentally shaped the way tourism information is distributed and the way consumers plan for and consume their travels. Several studies (Gretzel, 20069; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 200710) highlighted that the social media sites representing the user generated content or consumer generated content, gained popularity in online traveller’s use of internet to search for information, at the same
time, social media also allows the travellers to portray, reconstruct and relive their trips. (Pudliner, 200711; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 200912). User generated content also referred to as Consumer generated content is widely acknowledged in several research studies as a major source of information for travellers seeking information as part of their travel decision making. Work conducted by Gretzel, Yoo, and Purifoy (2007)13 as well as Arsal, Backman and Baldwin (2008)14, shows that the user generated content (travel reviews) are useful to a prospective traveller in deciding where to go (destination), where to stay (accommodation) and what to do at the travel destination (activities/attractions). Research done by Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 201115 indicate that user generated content significantly impacts the decisions on hotel bookings done online.

In the era of eCommerce, the user generated content might serve as a new form of word of mouth, specifically for products or services or brands. The importance of word of mouth has been a widely-researched topic since the dawn of internet technologies in the early 90s, which changed the way word of mouth is distributed and influence consumers (Anderson, 199816; Goldenberg, Libai, & Muller, 200117; Stokes & Lomax, 200218; Zhu & Zhang, 200619). Dellarocas (2003)20 pointed out that individuals can share their ideas and opinions to other users easily through internet. The research also highlighted that online word of mouth can have significant implications for the managers from a brand building, product development and quality assurance perspective. Goldenberg et al. (2001) reiterated that the consumer’s decision-making processes are influenced strongly by word-of-mouth from other consumers. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) from a survey data with 1480 respondents, evaluated the role of travel reviews in a traveller’s trip planning processes, further added that the reviews provided by the travellers are often perceived by other travellers as very up to date, reliable as well as enjoyable to read than the information provided by the service providers in the travel industry.

In the hospitality industry, Vermeulen and Seegers (2009)21 concluded that positive online reviews improve the perception of hotels among potential consumers. This was an experimental study conducted among 168 participants. Another study conducted by Dickinger and Mazanec (2008)22 concluded that the online reviews and recommendations of friends are most influential in hotel bookings. Despite all the hype and the increasing importance of the user generated content, several studies also reported that the online user generated reviews are perceived lower in credibility than the traditional word of mouth due to the lack of source cues on the Web (Dellarocas, 2003; Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 200523).

Credibility Perceptions of User Generated Content

New media and credibility perceptions have been tied closely for decades. In the 1950s when television was introduced as the new media, there were questions raised about its credibility. This debate was revived again the early 90s when Internet became the disruptive technology and emerged as the new media. The social media which came later is no exception to this credibility question.

The readers of the user generated reviews are faced with the task of evaluating the opinions of strangers (Dellarocas 2003, Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan 2008). In an online setting like social media, the readers of the reviews lack the cues that help in interpreting the opinions like, acquaintances with the person who has written the review, inference from the person’s facial expression, body languages, confidence within which he is sharing the feedback and so on. Dellarocas (2003) further stated that the ease with which online identities can be changed makes the user generated content vulnerable to manipulation of various sorts and abuse, thus leaving the task of evaluating the content or the reviews difficult. For example, any travel operator can pose as a neutral or an independent reviewer, can upload or post comments or reviews which are positive for their products or services, promoting their reputation, while being dishonest in tarnishing the reputation of their competitors. (Ibrahim 200824; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan 2008). Cox et al. (2009)25 outlined another concern about UGC sites in their research is that they include contributions from amateur, semi-professional as well as professional people.

One of the most relevant example of credibility perception of the user generated content was on TripAdvisor. It was alleged that it contained over 27,000+ legally defamatory reviews (The Times July 16, 2011)26. The TripAdvisor, U.K was ordered by the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) of the United Kingdom to rewrite its trust claims due to the complaints raised by some hotels. ASA went on further and warned that TripAdvisor or for that matter any site that hosts user generated reviews should not claim or imply that all their user reviews are honest and trust worthy. Further to this TripAdvisor removed all references to the term “trust” from its website homepage in the United Kingdom.

There were other reports in the press too like the TripAdvisor U.K issue. China Daily, June 17, 201027 reported that some managers were paying the webmasters of UGC sites to delete the consumers’ negative comments about their products or services, drew the attention on credibility concerns again. While there are many studies that examined the user generated sites, there is not much of scholarly attention on the credibility perceptions.
of user generated content from a travel perspective. The research done by Yoo and Gretzel (2006, 2008 and 2011) analysed the credibility of expert recommender systems, and Xie et al. (2011)28 examined the ambivalent online reviews. Sparks and Browning (2011)29 researched on the impact of the online reviews on the credibility of hotels. Gretzel (2006) in their study did say that the mediated nature of UGC sites raise concerns on the trustworthiness of their operators. In another study, Julian Ayeh et al. (2013)30 tried to analyse the credibility of UGC sources and explored how the perceptions of credibility influences the attitudes and intentions towards using UGC in the traveller’s travel planning. This study focused only on TripAdvisor and conducted the study among the users of TripAdvisor. The study found support for perceptual homophily as a critical determinant of credibility as well as the traveller’s attitude towards utilizing UGC in their travel planning.

Conclusion
As social media sites and the user generated content gets a wider usage for travel planning, the credibility of user generated content would continue to remain a key issue. As the social media sites compete with other sources of information including the information sources provided by the service providers, their credibility is extremely critical. The travel service providers as well as the UGC sites would have to deploy various strategies to mitigate this issue. Travel related UGC sites might have to pay more attention to credibility cues such as providing an identifiable name of the reviewer and their profile. This can be done by allowing the user to log in to the UGC site through their Facebook profile. The travel service providers need to monitor the traffic in the social media closely and specifically negative reviews and address issues raised by the travellers and address their concerns.

References


