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Social Media-Induced Tourism: A Conceptual Framework

As social media are becoming a primary information source for travellers, many people travel to a destination or an attraction as a direct result of being exposed to certain social media content, which can be called as social media-induced tourism. Understanding how social media induce travellers to visit is crucial for providing insights into destination marketing and management. This research note proposes a conceptual framework to describe the conditions wherein social media-induced tourism happens and suggests a series of research questions that may be used to guide future research.

Key words: social media-induced tourism; conceptual framework; future research agenda; destination marketing.

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Introduction

Recently, a new type of tourism has emerged, which can be generally called as social media-induced tourism. According to numerous reports, social media content has turned an ordinary street in France (Coffey, 2019), building in Hong Kong (Agence France-Presse, 2019), and farm in California (Marcus, 2019) into a travel hotspot. Consider the following news report:

Delta Lake in Grand Teton National Park was an unknown natural attraction in the past. Usually, only one or two travellers visited the attraction in a day. However, nowadays, over 145 travellers visit the attraction in a day. What has turned the originally unpopular attraction into a popular destination was a few geotagged posts uploaded by social media influencers on Instagram (Holson, 2018).

Although media-induced tourism is not a new concept (e.g., movie, or TV-induced tourism) (Beeton, 2010; Riley, Baker, & Van Doren, 1998; Su et al., 2011; Yen & Teng, 2015), tourism caused by social media seems more unpredictable and substantial. In general, social media-induced tourism has occurred in originally unpopular attractions that are least expected to become travel hotspots (Agence France-Presse, 2019; Coffey, 2019; Holson, 2018). As the unexpected attractions are overwhelmed by an influx of social media-induced tourists, many environmental, social, and economical issues have emerged: Environmental degradation; travellers are easily exposed to the risk of an accident due to a lack of infrastructure necessary to handle the influx; local residents suffer from tax increases to develop the infrastructure; and attractions are temporarily or permanently closed because of the overtourism (Hausold, 2019; Lowry, 2019; McLaughlin, 2019). As argued by Gretzel (2019), how social media-induced tourism happens needs to be differently explained from other media-induced tourism.

However, to our knowledge, there is a lack of formal discussion about the mechanism of social media-induced tourism, e.g., how it happens and what aspects of social media are involved. This research note aims to fill this gap by proposing a conceptual framework to describe the conditions for social media-induced tourism to take place. We consider four major aspects of social media (i.e., user, socio-technical, attraction, and communication) and explore the conditions related to each aspect.

Social Media-Induced Tourism: Four Major Aspects

Media-induced tourism has received increasing attention from both tourism researchers and operators (Connell, 2012). Numerous studies have tried to explain how media-induced tourism happens by investigating how different aspects play their parts (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Yen & Teng, 2013).

In the hospitality and tourism context, existing literature and real cases dealing with social media impacts have suggested different domains of knowledge as foundations for understanding social media-induced tourism. And, each domain has focused on a specific aspect of social media such as social media users (Gretzel, 2017) or communication process in social media (Yeoh, Othman, & Ahmad, 2013; Xiang et al., 2017), and so on. As such, we suggest four major aspects are important for understanding social media-induced tourism including social media users, socio-technical features of platforms, nature of attractions in social media content, and communication process in social media.

User Aspect

Users as Content Consumers

In the literature on media-induced tourism, the characteristics of media-induced tourists have been an essential topic (Singh & Best, 2004). Macionis (2004) suggests that

such tourists are more driven by internal motivations (e.g., ego-enhancement, self-actualization, or self-identity) than by external stimuli (e.g., movie characters, story or plot of film). Profiling media-induced tourists in various dimensions has developed our knowledge about media-induced tourism. However, the understanding of tourists whose perception and behaviour are affected by social media has been limited. Considering the demographic characteristics of tourists whose decision-making is easily affected by social media (e.g., younger and more educated) (Amaro, Duarte, & Henriques, 2016), other kinds of characteristics are expected. For example, certain socio-psychological characteristics of social media-induced tourists, e.g., open to experience (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), emotionally sensitive (Correa, Hinsley, & De Zuniga, 2010), or high risk-taking (Parra-López et al., 2011), may be essential for understanding these tourists and social media-induced tourism.

Users as Content Creators

Travellers are involved in social media-induced tourism not only as the induced but also as the inducer. As content creators, certain users have significant influence on others (Asquith, 2019). Social media influencers are users who build and maintain relationships with a number of followers and have the ability to influence their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours (Ong & Ito, 2019). The influencers are not the only condition of social media-induced tourism, but they have been identified in most cases as the initial motivators (Coffey, 2019). Although it has been shown that the characteristics of influencers which give them influential power can differ depending on the context (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), why influencers are influential in inducing their followers to travel has yet been well understood (Gretzel, 2017).

Socio-Technical Aspect

Likes, Comments, and Shares

In social media, likes, comments, and shares of content indicate its virality. Due to its potential to lead to offline behaviours of individuals, a viral effect is considered as an important condition of social media-induced tourism (Lowry, 2019; Martinko, 2019). A viral effect induces people not only to share the viral content but also to imitate: When the photo of a certain restaurant becomes viral on Instagram, people want to share the photo with their followers and, further, visit the restaurant to upload a similar photo (Berger, 2016). It is found that individuals who like, comment, and share brand-related content on social media are more likely to purchase the brand product (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & de Vries, 2015). However, it has not been fully explained how a viral effect within a social media platform develops into actual behaviours. Even if the social media content becomes viral, the viral effect could end in an online fad without an actual increase in the number of visits at the attraction (Alhabash et al., 2015). This suggests it is important to identify and understand what causes a viral effect, which, in turn, contributes to social media-induced tourism.

Hashtags and Geotags

Hashtags are the practice of “adding the # symbol in front of a word in order to categorize a message for indexing and retrieval” (Veletsianos, 2013, p. 649). Geotags are the process of “annotating objects and online resources with geospatial context information, ranging from specific point locations to arbitrarily shaped regions” (Inversini & Eynard, 2011, p.343). As content consumers, how travellers can utilize hashtags and geotags reveals why both tagging functions can be facilitators of social media-induced tourism (Djossa, 2019; Sheldon et al., 2017). For content consumers, hashtags are an effective way to search for content related to certain topics they are interested in (Caleffi, 2015). If concrete hashtags are used (e.g., #backpacking, #adventure, #nature, #sunset), travellers can easily find the content

showing the specific types of attractions they are seeking for (Caleffi, 2015). On the other hand, geotags let travellers know where the content has been created from: When the post includes photos, geotags show the exact locations where the photos are taken (Djossa, 2019). Hashtags and geotags can increase the likelihood of social media-induced tourism by enabling travellers to search what they really want to see and by telling them where to go for actualizing the inducement. However, such facilitating roles of hashtags and geotags have been overlooked because most research has focused on their functional value. For example, how useful are geotags in analysing users' locations and does adding hashtags in content increase its searchability? (Wong, Law, & Li, 2017).

Platform Characteristics

While the above-mentioned functions are available in most social media platforms, the main goal and mechanism of each platform are different, which, subsequently, creates differences in their user base (Xiang et al., 2017) and usage behaviour (Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017). According to Mills (2012), as each platform is geared toward distribution of different types of content (e.g., short text messages in Twitter, images in Instagram, videos in YouTube), how content gets viral is explained differently in each platform. Moreover, Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019) find that users have different reasons for using hashtags in each platform. Considering these differences, the understanding of social media-induced tourism needs to be contextualized within the platform.

Attraction Aspect

This aspect refers to a subject of social media content in the tourism context, which is an attraction such as restaurants, hotels, events, natural scenery, and so on. In the literature on media-induced tourism, which subject of media content becomes the focal point of travellers'

visit has been a major question (Riley et al., 1998). In the movie-induced tourism, travellers seek to visit specific locations that qualify as icons from the movies, and such icons may not be chosen only by their visual but also by the storyline and the themes associated with the locations (Buchmann, Moore, & Fisher, 2010; Singh & Best, 2004). According to numerous news reports, social media-induced tourism usually occurs in natural attractions (Bissett, 2019; Dickinson, 2019). Paris, Lee, and Seery (2010) also suggest that the inspiring impacts of social media can be significant when the attractions are events and festivals. It seems that specific types of attractions are more easily recognised and that certain attributes of attractions (e.g., novel, exotic, unexplored, adventurous, and cultural) can create a sensation on social media.

Communication Aspect

This aspect refers to the communication and persuasion process in social media which the above-mentioned aspects are integrated with. The communicative and persuasive effect of social media content are thoroughly explained when different aspects are considered holistically (Lo & Yao, 2019). As means of communication, the impact of social media content depends on how different information aspects in the content (e.g., creators' profiles, main topics or subjects in text or image) are combined into a persuasive message (Chung, Han, & Koo, 2015; Krause & Rucker, 2019). Moreover, the selection, ranking, and display of social media content are based on technical aspects (e.g., likes, comments, shares, hashtags, or geotags) to expose users to more interesting, popular, and personalized content (Xiang et al., 2017). To further understand its mechanism of social media-induced tourism, how major aspects of social media are related in terms of social media-induced tourism has to be investigated.

Conclusion

This research note introduces a new type of tourism, social media-induced tourism, and proposes a conceptual framework that describes how different aspects of social media may contribute to social media-induced tourism. This conceptual framework can serve as a starting point for the theoretical development of social media-induced tourism. A number of research questions can be formulated in relation to the aspects discussed above.

Social media user: Who are social media-induced tourists? Why are influencers influential in social media-induced tourism?

Socio-technical aspect: How does a viral effect on social media develop into social media-induced tourism? How can we use geotags and hashtags to understand social media-induced tourism? How do different platforms contribute to social media-induced tourism?

Attraction aspect: What types of attractions are likely associated with social media-induced tourism?

Communication aspect: How does communication process in social media which is different aspects are integrated contribute to social media-induced tourism?

While there are a range of implications for the theoretical development of social media-induced tourism, answering these questions can provide meaningful insights into the social media marketing strategies of destinations (Molinillo et al., 2018). For example, a prediction model of social media-induced tourism could be built to identify significant conditions and indicators for social media-induced tourism. Considering the unpredictable and substantial impacts of social media-induced tourism, an earlier detection of social media-induced tourism enables destinations to prepare for the influx of tourists, reduce the damage, and make better decisions for destination management.

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