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Follow Us on Instagram! Understanding the Driving Force behind Following Travel Accounts on Instagram

Instagram has become a popular channel to create travel inspiration, arouse interest in a destination, and act as electronic word-of-mouth, leading to the growth of travel influencers on the platform, and adoption of influencer marketing by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). The purpose of this study was a first effort to examine the motivational factors behind following travel-related accounts on Instagram and how follower motivations differ for travel influencers and DMOs. A quantitative survey found that usefulness, enjoyment and entertainment are the greatest motivational factors for following travel accounts on Instagram, and users prefer to follow DMO accounts for incentives and information. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Key words: Influencer Marketing, Social Media, Instagram, Destination Marketing, Motivation

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Introduction

In 2010, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) predicted social media to change how tourism businesses and suppliers market to and communicate with their customers. Ten years later, tourism marketing has in fact been shaped by social media and the power of user-generated content (UGC). Social media has transformed both how tourism organizations operate, communicate with, and market themselves to tourists, as well as how tourists search for, obtain, share, and produce travel information. Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) can no longer ignore the power of social media and today, most DMOs are active on at least one social media platform, primarily for marketing and management purposes (Uşaklı, Koç, & Sönmez, 2019).

Literature on social media and tourism has focused heavily on Facebook, Twitter, and review platforms such as TripAdvisor (Lu, Chen, & Law, 2018; Nusair, Butt, & Nikhashemi, 2019). Instagram, an image-based social media platform, has surpassed Twitter in the number of active users, reaching 1 billion monthly active users and 500 million daily users in 2019 (Clement, 2019). Instagram is now the third most popular social media platform in the United States in 2019 and the only platform that has experienced an increase of users since 2016 (Perrin & Anderson, 2019; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2019). Tourists have adopted Instagram as their platform to share photos and videos of their travel experiences with others, and DMOs have similarly adopted Instagram to promote the destination through pictures, and videos.

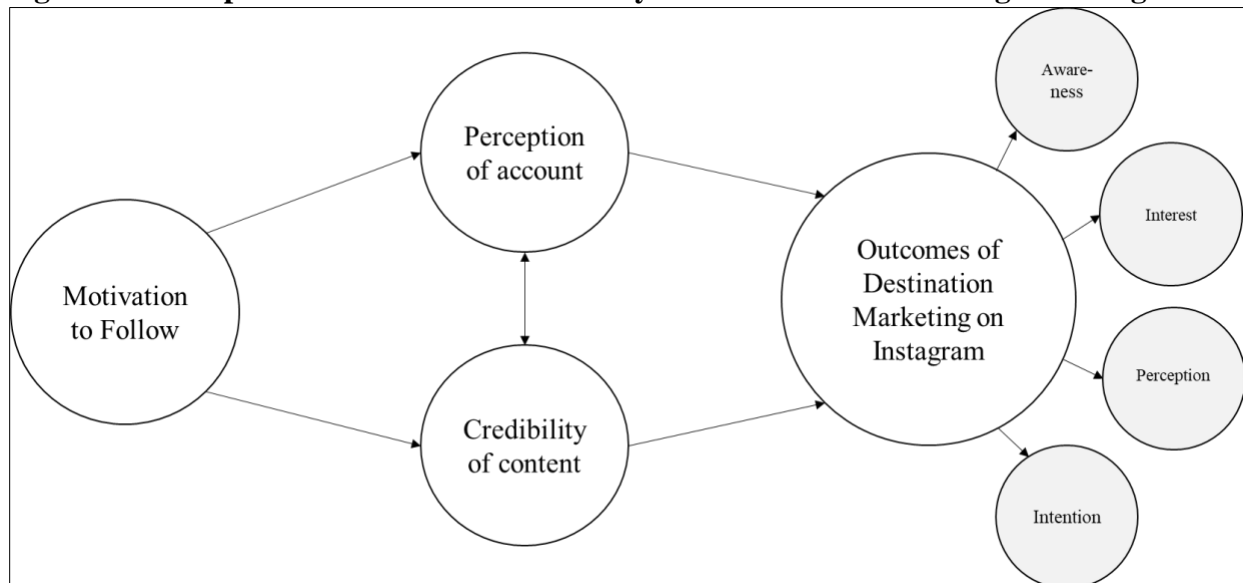
Along with its photo- and video-sharing capabilities, Instagram is one of the most popular platforms for influencer marketing (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017; Del Rowe, 2018). Influencer marketing refers to the marketing and promotion of products or services through content and messages spread by influential social media users (Carter, 2016). Instead of using endorsements from well-known celebrities, such as actors, musicians or athletes, influencer marketing involves

endorsements from individuals who gained popularity solely through the reputation they garnered from the content they post on social media (Del Rowe, 2018; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Termed ‘social media celebrities’, ‘micro-celebrities’ or ‘digital influencers’ due to their wide network and ability to influence their audience, influencers are viewed as more relatable than traditional celebrities and thus provide a powerful mechanism for electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Evans et al., 2017).

Influencers on Instagram have also become popular for tourism marketing. DMOs have realized the benefits of Instagram influencers and are increasingly collaborating with or hiring them to showcase their destination. For example, an influencer campaign by Visit Philadelphia generated 2.2 million impressions (Visit Philadelphia, 2017), and the island of Curaçao’s influencer campaign reached nearly 10 million people (PMYB, 2019). With such a wide reach and large number of impressions, examining the effect Instagram influencers have on a destination has been an emerging topic in the tourism literature, particularly in relation to travel intentions and destination image (e.g. Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Ong & Ito, 2019; Suciati, Maulidiyanti, & Lusia, 2018). However, influencer marketing on Instagram may generate additional outcomes aside from increasing the perceptions of the destination and visit intentions. Travel influencers may also increase awareness of lesser-known places, spark interest in a destination and inspire travelers. Further, there is little discussion surrounding the motivations for following travel influencer accounts on Instagram and the comparative impacts between influencer and DMO accounts. As DMOs increasingly utilize Instagram influencers for their marketing efforts, it is critical to understand why DMOs are opting to hire influencers to market their destination in addition to taking advantage of their own networks.

This research note provides the preliminary findings for a larger developing study which seeks to understand the outcomes of destination marketing on Instagram and the factors that influence these outcomes. Figure 1 provides the conceptual framework the study is based on. Prior to understanding these outcomes, the researchers seek to determine *why* users follow travel-related accounts on Instagram and *how* these motivations differ between account types (i.e. DMO vs. influencer). Therefore, this research note is a first effort to examine these motivational factors, as the antecedents of destination marketing on Instagram.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Full Study on Destination Marketing on Instagram



This study seeks to explain whether the motivations to follow influencers on Instagram are different from the motivations to follow official DMO accounts. By understanding why individuals are motivated to follow travel accounts on Instagram, DMOs can better cater to their audiences' needs by addressing these motivations, decide if influencer marketing is the right marketing tool for the destination, and hire the right influencers to address those areas that represent preferences to follow influencer accounts.

Literature Review

Social media can be defined as Internet-based applications with content created by users themselves – user-generated content (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Early on, the tourism industry integrated UGC in their marketing strategy through travel blogs (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007; Lin & Huang, 2006) or the use of testimonials and reviews of customers (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). With social media, UGC has emerged as a way for tourists to share their experiences and opinions about destinations and organizations as a form of eWOM. Managing and encouraging positive eWOM can generate more revenue, reinforce a positive destination image and enhance business activity (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Realizing this potential, tourism organizations are now hiring influential social media users to spread positive eWOM to their followers on social media.

Influencers are individuals who gained popularity online through their content and self-branding (Khamis et al., 2017) and are often perceived as “expert friends giving opinions on the latest products [or services] on the market” (Activate, 2018, p. 3). “They reinforce social proof in all they do, even when not paid to do so. What they wear, ride, listen to, where they go, intrigues and inspires communities” (Solis, 2016, p. 1). Their success is based on the perception of an influencer as ‘a person like you and me’ (Solis, 2016). While influencers exist on various social media platforms, Instagram has emerged as the predominant platform for influencer marketing (Activate, 2018).

Pictures are a powerful advertising element. Photos cannot only change the perception of consumers towards a certain product or service (Kim & Lennon, 2008) but also can be memorized easier than just text – particularly when it comes to tourism destinations (Babin, Burns, & Biswas, 1992). Therefore, Instagram, which mainly focuses on photos, videos, and ‘stories’ (short, disappearing videos), can be seen as an important tool for visual destination marketing. Moreover,

the type of photo and its uniqueness can create emotions towards the destination (Hanan & Putit, 2013). Influencers on Instagram understand the importance of visual content and spend considerable time and effort creating the ‘perfect photo’ to share with their followers. “From scouting locations to researching hashtags to working (and often re-working) captions with brand partners, creators [*influencers*] are putting countless hours of unseen work into posts” (Zfat, 2019).

Influencer Marketing in Tourism

The phenomenon of tourists serving as opinion leaders to spread the word about newly discovered destinations was already integrated in foundational tourism theories in the 1970s and 80s (Cohen, 1972; Plog, 1974; Butler, 1980). Opinion leaders, such as travel writers, have long been an important marketing tool for increasing attention, image and recognition of a brand (Glover, 2009; Mack, Blöse, & Pan, 2008). Influencers serve as opinion leaders in the current social media climate. Their success is attributed to their perceived authenticity, the level of engagement with their followers and the relevance of the posted content (Gretzel, 2017).

However, influencer marketing can also have some negative consequences for destinations. The rapid spike in the popularity of a certain place through the success of an influencer campaign can lead to a potential collapse of the local infrastructure, an over-expansion of carrying capacity, and the closing down of certain destinations. Some examples of negative outcomes of influencer marketing include the glass bridge over the Zhangjiajie Grand Canyon in China that had to close after 13 days of opening (Wang & Yu, 2016), and the damaging of a flower field in Lake Elsinore, California known as the #poppynightmare (Gammon, 2019). Therefore, DMOs need to cautiously weigh the positive and negative outcomes prior to hiring influencers to market their destination. An understanding of the motivations for travelers to follow influencers and/or DMO accounts on Instagram may be a first step in fully understanding the impact influencers have on a destination.

Motivations to Follow Social Media Accounts

The uses and gratification approach developed by Katz (1959) offers a first step toward understanding why users follow certain accounts on social media. According to Katz (1959), individuals are motivated by utility – whether they have a use for it – depending on the individual’s personal interest, values and social roles. Individuals may also be motivated for the gratification and incentives they seek to receive – monetary or non-monetary (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011).

In understanding why people choose to follow certain social media accounts, the branding and advertising literature offers further insights. For example, Sook Kwoon, Kim, Sung, and Yun Yoo (2015) examined consumers’ motivations for following and engaging with brands on Twitter. Adapting from both academic and industry literature, the authors developed 23 items about motivations for following brands broken up into five categories: incentive seeking, social-interaction seeking, brand usage/likability, information seeking, and entertainment seeking. Incentive-seeking was found to be the primary motivation for consumers to follow brands on Twitter, with social-interaction seeking and information seeking also significant motivators (Sook Kwon et al., 2015).

For Instagram, Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2017) adopted an ‘enjoyment-usefulness approach’ to identify factors influencing the intention to follow brands on the platform. In this study, the authors developed and tested a model which found that perceived enjoyment and perceived usefulness have a positive effect on satisfaction, which in turn has a positive effect on the intention to follow the brand account. This indicates that perceived usefulness and enjoyment indirectly influence the intention to follow a brand (Casaló et al., 2017).

While these previous studies have explored the motivations of users to follow brands on Facebook (Lin & Lu, 2011), Twitter (Sook Kwon et al., 2015), and Instagram (Casaló et al., 2017), no academic study to date has examined the motivations of users to follow travel-related accounts on Instagram. This research will, therefore, address this gap and provide critical insights as to why Instagram users follow travel-related accounts on Instagram, particularly travel influencers and DMOs. Furthermore, this study will look at the differences in the motivations to follow accounts of official DMOs or travel influencers. To address these overall questions and achieve the purpose of this study, this research note answers the following questions:

1. Why do Instagram users follow influencer and DMO accounts on Instagram?
2. How do the motivations to follow Instagram accounts differ between influencers and DMOs?

Methods

To answer the research questions of this study, a quantitative survey using a self-administered online questionnaire was used. For the purpose of this study, respondents were screened to accept only those who use Instagram regularly (at least once a week) and who follow any travel-related accounts on Instagram. The questionnaire was developed and based on previous literature, and pretested to ensure validity and reliability of the measurement items. After the pretest with a convenience sample (N=63) and adjustments, the questionnaire was sent out using the platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in July 2019. The study population was limited to those with an Amazon MTurk account registered in the United States. All data was downloaded from the software Qualtrics used for the setup of the questionnaire and converted into SPSS for further analysis.

Participants (N=202) were asked whether they follow influencer and DMO accounts. As the term ‘influencer’ may not be well-known, and users may not be aware that they are following influencer accounts, the questionnaire asked “Do you follow any personal Instagram accounts of individuals that share and/or document travel? A personal Instagram account does not need to be someone you know personally.” Similarly, they were asked “Do you follow any official tourism organizations on Instagram?” when referring to DMO accounts. Participants who did not follow a DMO or influencer Instagram account did not answer any questions about their motivation to follow these accounts. Therefore, participants were asked to rate only those accounts that they follow: DMO (n=139, 68.8%) and/or influencers (n=186, 92.1%). Only 9 respondents (4.5%) followed only DMOs, whereas 56 respondents (27.7%) followed only influencers. The majority of respondents (n=130, 64.4%) follow both influencers and DMO accounts.

Measures

The items for the motivations to follow travel-related accounts on Instagram either managed by an influencer and/or a DMO were derived from prior studies about motivations to follow brands on Twitter (Sook Kwon et al., 2015) and follow and recommend an Instagram account (Casaló et al., 2017) and adapted for this study. The motivations to follow travel-related accounts on Instagram was measured through 21 items (e.g. Following this Instagram account is funny and pleasant; I follow these to gain access to exclusive content; I follow these accounts to be the first to know information about travel). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert Scale from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. Responses were combined, as consistent with the literature, and Cronbach’s Alpha was examined, indicated reliability of the constructs: incentive seeking ($\alpha=.84$), social interaction ($\alpha=.87$), information

seeking ($\alpha=.65$), entertainment seeking ($\alpha=.76$), perceived usefulness ($\alpha=.85$), and perceived enjoyment ($\alpha=.86$).

This paper presents the preliminary findings based on the first stage of a larger project about motivations, perceptions, and social media behavior on Instagram. In the first stage and presented in this research note, the differential motivations for following travel-related accounts on Instagram are examined.

Findings

The study respondents had an average age of 32 ($M=32.33$, $SD=8.70$), however, nearly half (46.0%) were under 30 years of age. The sample consisted of relatively equal males (55.9%) and females (42.6%). Most respondents were white (79.6%) and had either a bachelor's degree (48.5%) or some college education (19.3%), followed by an associate's degree (10.4%). The majority of respondents earn an income below \$60,000. Although the sample was specified on MTurk to those who are US residents, 25.9 percent indicated that they currently do not live in the US.

Regarding travel behavior, 18.9 percent of respondents indicated to own a passport. Many respondents traveled outside the US within the last 6 months (36.8%), or 1–2 years ago (17.3%). However, 17.8 percent reported that they never traveled outside of the US. Respondents typically travel once a year (26.7%) or less (33.2%) and travel with their family (31.7%) or partner/spouse (33.7%). When looking for information about travel, Instagram was reported as the top information source (71.5%), above travel blogs (57.0%), the DMO website (56.0%), and WOM (50.0%).

The respondents' perceptions of influencers were generally high, with expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness each above a mean of 5 out of 7 on the Likert-scale ratings, indicating that influencers were perceived as being experts, trustworthy, and attractive. The

respondents’ perceptions of DMO accounts were even greater than those of influencers, with mean expertise and trustworthiness greater than 6.

RQ1: Why do Instagram users follow travel influencer and DMO accounts on Instagram?

Motivations to follow both travel influencer and DMO accounts were the highest for perceived usefulness, perceived enjoyment, and entertainment, and the lowest for incentive seeking (Table 1). Perceived usefulness refers to the utilitarian dimension of following a travel account, and although not directly addressed in regards to influencers, perceived usefulness has been found to be a crucial factor that explains why users follow a brand on social media (Casaló et al., 2017). Perceived enjoyment refers to the degree of pleasure and fun derived from following a travel account, whereas entertainment focuses on relaxation and passing time. Casaló et al. (2017) suggest that on photo-sharing sites, users may prefer to watch and admire photos shared by others. These findings suggest that users are motivated to follow travel accounts both for their utilitarian purpose as well as for the enjoyment they receive from the photos and videos shared.

Table 1. Motivations to Follow Travel-Related Accounts

| | Influencer | | DMO | |
|----------------------|------------|------|------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD |
| Perceived usefulness | 5.45 | 1.20 | 5.64 | 1.17 |
| Perceived enjoyment | 5.52 | 1.08 | 5.59 | 1.10 |
| Entertainment | 5.43 | 1.09 | 5.39 | 1.13 |
| Information Seeking | 4.96 | 1.20 | 5.29 | 1.15 |
| Social Interaction | 4.41 | 1.42 | 4.56 | 1.57 |
| Incentive Seeking | 3.73 | 1.72 | 4.37 | 1.59 |

Interestingly, incentive seeking was the least motivational factor for following these two types of travel accounts. This is inconsistent with the existing branding literature, which found that incentive seeking was a primary motivation for following brands on the social media platform

Twitter (Sook Kwon et al., 2015). The reason for this inconsistency may be due to the differential nature of the platforms. However, providing incentives through giveaways and discount codes is a common practice by Instagram influencers (Taylor, 2019).

RQ2: How do motivations to follow Instagram accounts differ between influencers and DMOs?

T-tests were conducted to test the differences in motivations for following travel influencers and DMO accounts. The differential motivations to follow influencers and DMOs were statistically significant for incentive seeking ($t(323)=-3.412$, $p=0.001$) and information seeking ($t(323)=-2.445$, $p=0.015$). Referring to Table 1 for the individual means and standard deviations, these results indicate that there is a stronger motivation to follow DMO accounts than travel influencers for information seeking and incentives. These findings suggest that despite the frequent offering of incentives by influencers, respondents are following influencers more for enjoyment and passing time, whereas DMO accounts are followed more for information about the destination and incentive offerings.

Conclusion

In attempt to understand the motivations behind following travel-related accounts on Instagram, this study resulted in several significant findings. Addressing the overall research question as to why Instagram users follow travel-related accounts on Instagram, the greatest motivating factors were usefulness, enjoyment, and entertainment for both influencer and DMO accounts, with DMOs more likely to be followed for information and incentives.

Overall, these findings provide important insights as to the motivations Instagram users have for following travel-related accounts. The theoretical implications of this study go beyond filling the gap in the literature on motivations to follow travel-related accounts, and provide a

steppingstone to further research that will examine more factors regarding the unique phenomenon of influencer marketing in tourism. Understanding the motivations to follow influencers, seen as opinion leaders, in comparison to DMOs can inform researchers and industry professionals as to how differential motivations impact online and offline behaviors.

This study also increases knowledge to the industry, particularly for destination managers looking to understand influencer marketing. DMOs should consider developing content on Instagram that matches with the motivations users have for following their accounts when seeking to increase the number of followers and their online impact. The DMO, as the managing/marketing organization of the destination's brand, should focus their Instagram efforts toward providing useful information to prospective travelers in an enjoyable and entertaining format. Incentive seeking was lower for influencers than DMOs, therefore DMOs thinking about partnering with an influencer to offer giveaways or provide discounts may want to reconsider whether the influencer is worth the return on investment (ROI), especially if the DMO already has a wide enough reach to have the same impact.

This study provided preliminary results to a wider research project, presented in Figure 1. As such, there are some limitations that will be addressed as the research progresses. The relatively small sample of this study poses a limitation. Future research will include a larger sample to improve the generalizability of the results. In addition, this study used a broad definition of 'influencer' in attempt to clarify the meaning for respondents. The definition will be revised and tested before proceeding to the next stage of the research. Research on Instagram and influencers is still emerging, especially as it relates to tourism, which presented itself as both a limitation and an opportunity. While this study provided insights to the motivations for following travel influencers on Instagram, future research should consider qualitative data to delve deeper into why

these motivations take place. Future research should also seek to understand how different motivations impact travel intentions.

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