Chapter 56
An Evaluation of Toronto's Destination Image Through Tourist Generated Content on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at evaluating the cognitive, affective, and conative components of destination image from the perception of tourists on social media. The netnography technique is used for data analysis and interpretation. Through a textual content analysis approach, an interpretation of meaning of content produced from tweets by tourists is conducted. The findings show that destination attractions were the most commented on component of the cognitive component. Throughout the travelling process, tourists assessed the affective destination image. It was found that tourists' evaluation was of favourable emotions towards Toronto as a destination. The conative component was assessed before, during, and after visiting Toronto. Tourists provided insight into their behaviour online through personal updates and information sharing. The research outcomes provide scholars and practitioners with greater insight into the dimensions of destination image formed by user-generated content from tourists and their usefulness for information exchange in various settings.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourists' travel decision –making process is heavily influenced by destination image when planning a holiday and an integral component is the image that represents the destination (Cai, 2002; Morgan et al.; 2004, Iwashita, 2006). The destination image formation process takes place through a stimulus of media

including, official promotional campaigns, word-of-mouth, guidebooks, popular culture, and the media (Hammett, 2014). Additionally, Gunn (1988) proposes the seven-stage process that tourists use to form destination image: (1) accumulating mental images of the destination – organic level; (2) modifying the initial image after more information – induced level; (3) deciding to visit the destination; (4) visiting the destination; (5) sharing the destination; (6) returning home; and (7) modifying the image based on the experience. On the other hand, the emergence of social media is influencing how tourists assess destination image components. The study of social media relating to destination image is evolving as researchers seek to better understand what tourists expect and their behaviour online (Lange-Faria and Elliot, 2012). Few previous studies focused on the role of social media in the travel planning and destination marketing process (e.g. Chung and Buhalis, 2008; Hsu and Lin, 2008; O'Connor, 2008). However, there has been a gap in literature that explores tourists' evaluation of a destination image on social media despite its significance (Kladou and Mavragani, 2015; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

Given the developments of new information sources, such as social media, and the influence of user-generated content on the customer's decision-making process (Jalilvand et al., 2012) it is consequently important to consider the evaluation of destination image from the tourists perspective. Accordingly, this study aims to assess tourists' evaluation of the destination image components of Toronto from tourist generated content on Twitter. This is assessed by exploring topics of destination image related information exchange on Twitter before, during and after travelling to Toronto so as to assess tourists' perceptions, experiences, and levels of satisfaction about the destination. In addition, the research will conclude with recommendations on how this evaluation of destination image components on social media can benefit destination-marketing organisations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section introduces and analyses previous research published about tourist generated online content on Twitter, destination image and the key topics that are connected to this area. This can be seen through the conceptual framework detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research conceptual framework

2.1. Tourist Generated Content on Twitter

User-generated content refers to, "the information that is digitalized uploaded by the users and made available through the Internet," (Munar, 2011, p. 292). It is created and used by users with the intent of sharing it with others (Kohli et al., 2015). Gretzel and Yoo (2008) found that more than 74% of travellers use the comments of other consumers as a source of information when planning their holiday. Tourists share their evaluation and perceptions of destination image on social media and these evaluations can

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