

## Chapter 2

# Peer Influence Mechanism Behind Travel Experience Sharing on Social Network Sites

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### ABSTRACT

*The way tourism consumers share travel experiences have changed tremendously in recent years. There is increased use of technology to distribute travel experiences via social networking sites. Travel companies are increasingly developing their websites in order to network with their tourism customers. These network sites play a significant role in receiving customer feedback using online reviews. As a result, travel companies can utilize their customer evaluations to improve products and service offerings. The visual images and textual postings on network sites have the power to motivate others to embark on travel. This chapter is about peer influence mechanisms behind travel experience sharing on the social network sites. It uses both phenomenology and ethnographic methodological approaches to analyze some of the comments and photographs posted on SNSs by tourists in Malawi. It concludes that most of the tourists traveling to Malawi were influenced by what is being shared on social network sites, yet others do visit out of curiosity to discovering new things.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The sharing travel experiences is not a new concept (Havell & Ross, 1819). What appears to be new, is the increasing and modernised methods of distributing information to both existing and potential tourism consumers (Buhalis & Shaw, 2008; Tussyadiah & Zach, 2012; Wang et al., 2012; Xiang et al., 2014; Hjalager, 2015; Law & Wang, 2018). The digital devices and their applications have completely changed the travellers mind set because they are able to take photographs but also write instant online reviews and store share information to others through various social network sites (Tussyadiah & Fesenmier, 2009; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). Social network sites such as websites, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, blogs and Trip Advisor are utilised by travellers when sharing travel experiences through messages, videos and photos (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Volo, 2010; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017).

Sharing travel experiences through social media provides several benefits to consumers. Dedeoğlu, Taheri, Okumus and Gannon (2020) provide a summary of benefits as (a) easier access to information, (b) provision of more substantial products and services information from different viewpoints, and (c) the provision of end-user evaluation. Equally, both existing and potential travel consumers may use social media to search for information on where to go, on where to find accommodation options, leisure activities like excursions and night life (Cox et al., 2009; Amaro et al., 2016). It is acknowledged that social media plays a significant role before travelling, during information search (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). It is also crucial for the travellers to seek for destination information when embarking on the international destination trip for the first time (Simms, 2012; Amaro et al., 2016), of which, most of the information is found and shared on the social network sites for tourism organisations and previous travellers including travel bloggers (Lin & Chen, 2012; Ho, Lin, Yuan, & Chen, 2016; Sahin, Sener & Polat, 2018).

Social media usage among top destination marketing organizations is still in its experimental stage with a high degree of variation in terms of their strategies (Hays et al., 2013). As such, there is a great need, not only for the tourism companies that market destinations but also travellers in general to learn and understand the factors that influence conversation and engagement on social network sites (Miranda & Saunders, 2003; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). It is important to understand both the positives and negative outcomes as a result of social media sharing as the power of information technology through social network sites cannot be underestimated. Therefore, it is critical to be more strategic and position the motivations and experiences in order to educate, inform and warn potential travellers about the status of tourist destination through social platforms (Chilembwe, Mweiwa & Mankhomwa, 2018; Chilembwe & Mweiwa, 2019). According to the blog 'Taking Africa to the World', Wodemaya (2019) advises that potential travellers should strive to check what other people comments or share online about a destination. Citing an example of China and other several cities where many people travel during holidays, hence making cities crowded. On the contrary, the cities are almost empty in some parts of the world, for example Malawi. In China, it is the opposite as there are very few public holidays resulting into many people travelling during public holidays to their families, friends and relatives. Sharing of travel experience like this one, helps to prepare a potential travel to understanding what is expected of during holidays in terms of overcrowding and delayed transport and connection systems (Wodemaya, 2019). The population of China is already high in comparison to other countries, so it also contributes to the situation in addition to other travellers to China during public holidays. Several personal and companies'

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