Chapter 14
A Conceptual Framework to Understand Online Destination Images:
A Research Model Utilizing User-Generated Content Through Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes a new conceptual model to understand the construction of online destination images. This will lead to a more accurate and realistic portrayal of how destination images are created, and allow destination managers (and other stakeholders) to better understand the images promoted, and how these comport with the actual experience of users. The model integrates a sequential and mixed methods approach, enabling a conceptualization of how user generated content (UGC) is utilized to formulate and construct destination images.

INTRODUCTION

The construction of image of a destination is vital in tourism marketing. In the early 2000s, Destination Marketing Organizations' (DMO) marketing of the tourism product was the preponderant research medium. Attracting visitors is a major concern for destinations, and the destination image can critically influence a traveler's destination choice (Cai, 2002). Destination marketers use the physical reality, artifacts, architecture, weather, culinary features, and the history to sell a destination to potential tourists. However, an image goes beyond the physical characteristics of a place.

The definition of a destination image (and its constructs) is contested and multi-faceted. Not surprisingly, the tourism literature does not seem to agree upon a universal definition (Martin-Santana et al., 2017). Crompton defines destination image as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions a person about a destination (Crompton, 1979). Given the multi-faceted definition, the concept of a destination image depends on how people get informed.

Destination branding has been the core of what marketers have communicated to travelers. However, due to Social Media Platforms, the image of a place is no longer framed by destination marketers. Alternative information sources can market a destination through a collective global outreach where brands are formed by individual, group or official sources. Existing models of the conceptualization of the destination image through studies of tourist perceptions via onsite, mail or phone surveys, focus groups, or interviews are outdated in the context of globalization and technological improvements such as WEB networks. Web technologies make it possible to assess online and global communication data without structured survey questions with pre-tested constructs. Thus, the traditional image-makers, DMOs and tourism promoters, are not the only stakeholders that can construct a destination image. Previous research has shown that destination managers may be active players through creating content and communicating by understanding images communicated by influencers (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). This chapter presents a new approach to investigate destination images which are communicated by influencers through Twitter. An influencer is a user on social media who has access to a large audience, is mentioned by others and whose posts are re-posted so that can persuade others by virtue of their authenticity and reach. This approach will stimulate better planning for sustainable brand image in tourism practices as an exemplary model for any destination.

User Generated Content (UGC) is any type of shared communicated content that has been created and shared through online platforms by unpaid contributors. The explosion of UGC is a result of WEB and mobile technologies, which provide individuals with unprecedented power to instantaneously add digital traces when performing tasks such as reviewing and documenting travel experience (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015). Although the term Social Media is difficult to define, a typical definition is an internet-based application that construct user generated content (Blackshaw, 2006). Social media content is produced by consumers and can challenge the content of DMOs (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Perceptions about any destination might shift due to personal experiences or learned knowledge through communication. Social Media (SM) platforms, such a twitter, enables individuals to share personal experiences and/or information much quicker than word-of mouth. To understand the change in people's perceptions towards a destination, this study integrates thematic networks, cognitive and affective components of destination image, time element and sentiment analysis. This chapter offers a sequential mixed methods approach which may be operationalized in future studies. In this chapter, destination image constructs are utilized to understand the current latent variables of destination images. The model visually depicts a destination image through a deductive approach of UGC content.

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