
Exploring the Elements That Create Appeal to Touristic Websites and Social Media

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to explore factors which influence traveler's evaluations of touristic website and social media. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social platforms allows tourists to easily share and depend on word-of-mouth, opinions, recommendations, and suggestions during raveling. Further, social media provides guidance regarding various destinations, accommodations, restaurants, and attractions. A qualitative research was conducted. According to the qualitative analysis, the respondents in this study consider social media appealing because the information provided allows travelers to plan their trips without worry due to the reliance of other travelers' reviews. The website's virtual existence, available published content variety, and social networking make the social media to be appealed. This paper provides useful information which is needed for the promotion of tourism services through the usage of social media. It offers practical help to tourism planners and marketers in Egypt to understand the concept of social media desirability.

Keywords Online Content, Social Networking, Tourism Websites, Virtual Existence

Paper type: Research Paper

1. Introduction

The Tourism is an immense industry, contributing \$6 billion a year to the world economy (The Economic Times, 2013). Nowadays, travelers are relying more than ever on word of mouth (Wirtz et al., 2013). Thus, the travel and hospitality businesses are turning to social media (new information and communication technologies) to promote its services and engage personal communication among travelers (Milanoa et al., 2011). Social media are playing an increasingly important role as information sources for travelers. Various social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social platforms made specifically for tourism provide user-generated content and where reviews help travelers identify the suitable destinations, according to various tastes and types of traveler (Miguéns et al., 2008). They allow people to easily share and depend on word-of-mouth, opinions, recommendations, and suggestions (Peng et al., 2013). Further, these social media provide guidance regarding various destinations, accommodations, restaurants, and attractions (Llach et al., 2013) as well as provide information about countries, hotels, attractions, spas, restaurants, transportation, and much more provide valuable content about the traveling. As the effect of online social networking websites on tourism is important (Milanoa et al., 2011), this study investigates the determinants of social media appeal on potential tourists' intentions to visit a certain country in the Egyptian context. Further, this study assessed people who made vacation plans through the usage of social media (traveling choices that were assembled with the assistance and involvements from social media networks). The purpose is to gain more perspectives from tourists in the Middle East context, particularly Egypt, to add more knowledge in the academic field.

2. Conceptualization

The World Wide Web (WWW) is currently enduring two-way individual collaborative activities. It is shifting from a business-to-consumer publicizing to a peer-to-peer sharing of information (Wirtz et al., 2013). The Web 2.0 business representations offer individuals a chance to participation in information giving, creating online user generated contents. The wealth of subjective content is a significant and powerful feature of Web 2.0 applications (Anderson, 2007). Tourism is one of the sectors that are linked and are affected with the new information and communication technologies. Personal online information (regarding personal experiences,

opinions, feedback, etc.) can facilitate tourism establishments (whether hotels or other tourism companies) with effective awareness (Miguéns et al., 2008).

The Internet and its social media tools are becoming popular worldwide. It is a source of information that people depend on. It allows people to easily access information (generated by organization or independent individuals) and effortlessly share their own views, comments, and suggestions in an informal and shared manner (Wirtz et al., 2013). In the context regarding tourism, Web 2.0 applications have been named Travel 2.0 since it is highly prevailing in directing tourists' choices (Miguéns et al., 2008). The personal stories, feedback, opinions, reviews, and referrals of fellow travelers act as information agents that provide more realistic, reliable and trustworthy source than the business establishments (Baggio and Cooper, 2008). The power is due to their noncommercial motives. Hence, it is an extremely persuasive communication mechanism to impact potential tourists to visit a certain destination (Milanoa et al., 2011). As a result, all tourism businesses need to implement strategies and tools (websites or portals) based on user generated contents or, at least, to incorporate these new technologies to enrich their multimedia contents.

2.1 Defining Social Media

The contact and communication among people in which they create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks are identified as social media. Social media are *"a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content"* (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p.61). Social media networks are subcategories of information communication technology (ICT). They are *"online tools and utilities that allow communication of information online and participation and collaboration"* (Newson, 2008, p.3). Social media are considered online communities of people who share, gain, and acknowledge common interests and activities. Social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogging, provide people with a collection of various interaction possibilities, such as instant chats, multiple video conferences, exchange of email messages, participation in blogs, and discussion groups (Wirtz et al., 2013). The following section will further define the four most widely and effectively used social networks.

Facebook- Facebook was introduced in 2004 as a social networking website. In the beginning, it was made exclusively for Harvard students. According to Facebook Inc. it now has become a worldwide community with roughly 1.11 billion active users, as of March 2013. In this community, there are various activities to be done. Facebook users can import and search for contacts; communicate with friends; upload photos and videos; play games; and create and join interest groups called “like pages”. Interactions with Facebook members occur in different ways such as updating the “status” on their personal page, writing on other members’ walls (friends page), chatting instantly in the dialogue box, or sending direct personal messages in inbox (Newson et al., 2008). In the Egyptian context, the country contained the highest number of users of any Arab region. Furthermore, during 2011, almost 2 million Egyptians joined Facebook, the highest growth in users in the Arab region, making 6,586,260 active Facebook users (Idle and Nunns, 2011).

Twitter- Twitter was introduced in 2006. This social network allowed members to communicate through sending short posts (140 characters) called tweets. People are also able to follow, monitor, and contribute to the updates and tweets of other users, noncommercial or commercial individuals and establishments. Tweets are categorized using hash tags (group posts together by topic or type). The tweets are based on “*real-time information network that connects you to the latest information about what you find interesting* (Idle and Nunns, 2011).” According to the Arab social media report (2013), total number of active Twitter users in the Arab world reached 3,766,160 as of March 2013. Twelve percent from this number were Egyptians.

YouTube- YouTube is the third most visited website online. YouTube is a different type of social media compared to Facebook and Twitter. This website is dedicated solely to uploading and sharing personal video. Members are able to share and view media, as well as leave comments on videos. Over 3 billion videos are viewed each day on YouTube, reaching 700 billion playbacks in 2010 (Nielsen, 2010). According to Africa and Middle East of TNS Global (2013), 13.2 million people are daily users of YouTube in Egypt (44% of active internet users).

Social Media Specifically for Tourism Purposes- Presently online, there are social networks that have been established specifically for tourism purposes. These online travel networking are changing the way tourists plan their trips (Wirtz et al., 2013). Like Facebook, Twitter, and other

social communities, travel social networks and websites allow users to interact and provide reviews on hotels or on local tourist attractions (Milanoa et al., 2011). The websites users do not have pre-existing associations (the discussion, reviews, and ratings generated by other users). People who have visited a destination write on the website about their personal experiences, opinions, feedbacks and criticisms (positive and negative comments). TravBuddy, Travellers point, where are you now (WAYN), World of photography (Woophy), PassportStamp, and Trip-Advisor are examples of travel social media. These travel communities covers 212000 hotels, over 30000 destinations, and 74 000 attractions worldwide (Trip-Advisor Fact Sheet, 2013). These groups were formed to give people around the world the opportunity to network, share ideas, and discuss issues regarding their tourism experience. The tourism network discussions contain complementary products such as activities, accommodation, transport, and food, whereby tourists are referred from one organization to another to provide a comprehensive tourist experience (Grefe, 1994).

Tourism social networks offer noncommercial communication from average people who traveled before to a specific destination (Milanoa et al., 2011). These websites provide trusted advice from real travelers; a wide variety of travel choices; and planning features with various links to booking tools. Furthermore, in these websites, viewers can gain numerous reviews and opinions regarding accommodations, restaurants, and attractions. This information allows travelers to plan their trips easily without worry due to the reliance of other travelers' reviews (Trip-Advisor Fact Sheet, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013).

As an evidence of the growing importance of online search and influence on travel behaviors, a survey of the hotel and restaurant industry in Europe in 2007 concluded that 80% of UK consumers are researching online before booking a hotel and half of them maintained to have refrained from booking a specific hotel as a consequence of a negative review on Trip-Advisor, like websites (Baggio and Cooper, 2008).

2.2 Motives for Online Touristic Information Search

Prior literature showed that potential tourists are persuaded to search for online travel reviews before travel decisions (Wirtz et al., 2013). People are attracted to the use of the Internet for various purposes and motives (Lenhart et al., 2010). Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) indicated

that tourists' use the Internet to search for touristic information because of their functional needs, hedonic needs, innovation needs, aesthetic needs and sign needs. Kim et al. (2011) discovered that potential tourists are motivated to seek online travel reviews due to its convenience and quality, risk reduction, and social reassurance. Fodness and Murray (1999) indicate that a tourist's information search strategy has significant impacts on his length of stay, number of destination visited, number of attractions visited, and the travel-related expenditures. Browsing a touristic website leads to changes of attitude and behaviour, including searching for more information, coming back to the website, and visiting the destination (Wirtz et al., 2013).

For the purposes of this paper, the researcher focused on why people are attracted to use social networks (identifying the elements that make touristic websites and social media appealing to use). According to Wirtz et al. (2013) study, the results showed that social media website attractiveness is determined by the interaction orientation, social networking and user-added value. Thus, this study took these variables and examined them in the Egyptian context to establish the approval and validation of these variables. The researcher wanted to develop results that shed light on the key aspects of users' expectations towards the integration of social media into vacation planning and how social media instruments the Egyptians evaluate.

3. Methodology

To gain further understanding and insights on touristic websites and social media appeal, a mono method of qualitative techniques was used. Qualitative research is the: *"process of enquiry that draws data from the context in which events occur, in an attempt to describe these occurrences, as means of determining the process in which events are embedded and the perspectives of those participating in the events, using induction to derive possible explanations based on observed phenomena"* (Gorman and Clayton, 2005, p.3). Semi-structured interviews were casted to collect the data. The questions focused on specific topics to draw insightful causal inferences. It is flexible in its nature due to the circumstance that the method makes is possible to reorganize interview questions and adjust the process to different situations and interviewees. The sampling method was nonprobability sampling. Fifteen interviews were conducted until saturation level of data was met.

4. Qualitative Analysis

During spring 2014, the researcher visited numerous sites (college campuses, International schools, malls, sports club, etc.) to interview people in order to learn about potential tourists' outlooks towards using touristic websites and social media. A total of 15 participants from different socio-demographic backgrounds were interviewed. Table 1 illustrates the attributes of the participants in this study.

Table 1: The Respondents Demographic Traits

	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Career
Respondent 1	Female	Age 18	Engaged	Student
Respondent 2	Female	Age 26	Single	Business
Respondent 3	Male	Age 24	Widow	Teaching
Respondent 4	Male	Age 48	Divorced	Administrator
Respondent 5	Female	Age 33	Singe	Student Councilor
Respondent 6	Male	Age 23	Single	Student
Respondent 7	Male	Age 28	Single	Engineer
Respondent 8	Male	Age 45	Married	Artist
Respondent 9	Male	Age 61	Married	Administrator
Respondent 10	Female	Age 55	Married	Teacher
Respondent 11	Female	Age 24	Engaged	Business
Respondent 12	Female	Age 33	Married	Teaching
Respondent 13	Female	Age 20	Engaged	Administrator
Respondent 14	Male	Age 34	Married	Clerk
Respondent 15	Male	Age 44	Married	Store Manger

The qualitative data was analyzed to build valid inferences and conclusions in the form of words. The aim was to determine and identify various variables (regarding the touristic websites and social media appeal) to be placed in the proposed research model. The researcher reduced, rearranged, and combined the obtained data in order to explore and evaluate the outcomes.

During the qualitative analysis, the interviewees indicated that the Internet and social media was a reliable source of information to make traveling choices like what country to visit, hotels to stay in, and tickets to purchase. The following quotations are some supporting statements that various interviewees mentioned about this declaration in their conversations:

- **Respondent 1:** *"I like the Internet- that's how I plan all my travel. This summer I'm going to London, Manchester, and Wales, and I did it all online."*
- **Respondent 4:** *"Social media and other traveling websites are an excellent information source; I use the websites of the main tourist boards. These websites are beneficial for information and about special promotions or offers."*
- **Respondent 6:** *"With the Internet, people are consuming, making, and sharing media, creating awareness to various touristic products and services."*
- **Respondent 7:** *"I believe that social media empowers and aids people to engage in creative content production, inspiring them with new means of generating, nourishing, and bearing connections with others".*
- **Respondent 9:** *"I researched our trip largely on the internet - very helpful, including booking airline tickets, hostels, etc."*
- **Respondent 10:** *"Social network play a vital role in people's lives, delivering educational outcomes; accessing more information than ever before; enabling supportive relationships; and promoting useful products and services".*
- **Respondent 13:** *"An advantage of social media is its capacity for swiftly exchanging and publishing info to millions of people inside/ outside of Egypt."*
- **Respondent 14:** *"Social media, travel websites and other links through the national tourist boards allow viewers to easily request more information. Prices and quality clearly stated. Access to vacationers ratings (not direct from the businesses)".*

The interviewees declared that social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social websites (specifically for traveling purposes, such as Trip-Advisor) were appealing to potential vacationers and voyagers. The following quotations are some supporting statements that various interviewees mentioned about this declaration in their conversations:

- **Respondent 1:** *“The website provides user generated content that is noncommercial (users autonomously generate the posted information).”*
- **Respondent 3:** *“The websites provide comments and ratings on a destination, a hotel, an attraction or any other tourism related ‘object’ or service”.*
- **Respondent 4:** *“The multimedia elements (photos and videos), travel maps of previous trips and the personal experiences discussions and posts on these web-based applications are persuasive and eye-catching.”*
- **Respondent 6:** *“Travel websites and social media offer illustrated catalogues that provide potential customers with a significant amount of information, with high aesthetic photos, useful tips, maps and much more.”*
- **Respondent 8:** *“The Internet provides people with various online activities for gathering and sharing online information and knowledge.”*
- **Respondent 10:** *“I like to use touristic websites and social media because it exposes me to various hotel, airport, casino, beach, and map.”*
- **Respondent 12:** *“The convenience, user-friendliness, accessibility, openness and availability of Internet have radically changed my motivation to plan and book trips.”*
- **Respondent 13:** *“I believe that online websites give people around the world the opportunity to network, share ideas, and discuss issues regarding actual personal tourism experiences.”*
- **Respondent 15:** *“Social media provides me with many interaction possibilities, such as instant chats, multiple videoconferences, exchange of email messages, participation in blogs, and discussion groups. I think that social media stimulates and encourages social interaction, which raises awareness about tourists’ opinions in through the country.”*

The interviewees indicated that when people enter these websites to view content, leave comments, like posts, share pictures, join conversations, and engage with contacts and fans, they become attracted to the source, using it as a guide for the traveling planning. Furthermore, when the online visitors feel like they are gaining awareness, they are much more likely to become a return visitor and to recommend the site to their friends and family. Hence, travel and hospitality industries and social media can work together to drive guest engagement. A specific interviewee (Respondent 6) mentioned a suitable and worthy supporting statement to this declaration: “A

network of travelers can aid people by contributing their suggestions, reviews, and advice regarding various destinations and facilities. These linkages with people in a social network and is designed to save time on finding those who share travel similar tastes”.

The qualitative outcomes of this study were similar to prior research outcomes. This study support that people use the Internet in tourism because they desire various travel reports and news. Travellers use the Internet when they decide to plan a trip in order to benefit from the social interactions. Through the use of various websites and social media, potential vacationers can check and assess photos or reviews from acquaintances’ past trips posted on Facebook or by unknown travellers that post reviews on sites. According to prior studies, social media is generally used to describe collaborative media commination, viewing user-generated content networks (Lenhart et al., 2010). With the Internet, people enthusiastically and actively produce and consume media (Bruns 2008). Social media empowers and aids people to engage in creative content making (Lenhart et al., 2010). According to Wirtz et al. (2013) study, the results showed that social media website attractiveness is determined by the interaction orientation, social networking and user-added value.

Based on the interviews’ quotations and paradigms, which were supported by prior studies, various antecedents were developed to know what constitutes for the creation of social media appeal. Figure 1 illustrates the following conceptual framework that was developed in this study after the analysis of the qualitative data. The researcher postulated that the antecedents that create website and social media appeal were: virtual existence published content and social networking. These elements positively appeal to touristic websites and social media. Accordingly, the results can serve as a starting point for other theoretical and empirical studies.

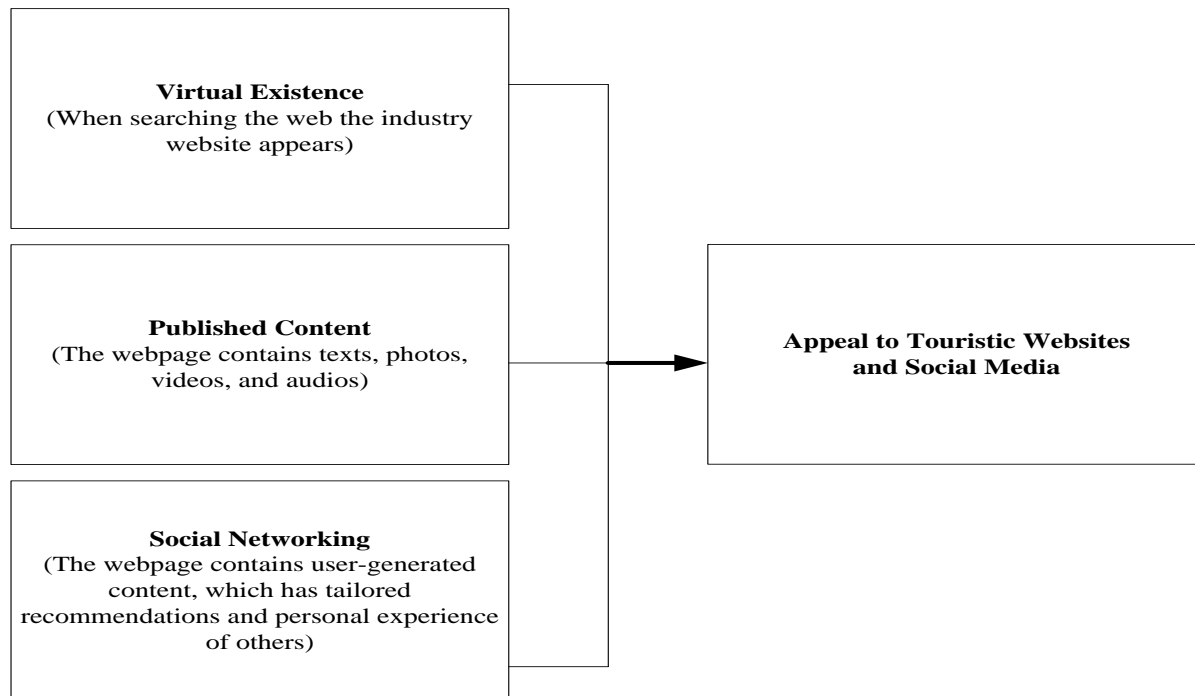


Figure 1: Proposed research Model- Antecedents of Social Media Attractiveness

5. Discussions and Conclusion

Social networking is changing the way tourists plan their trips (Wirtz et al., 2013). Touristic social networks and websites provide a means for people to interact and provide reviews on hotels or on local traveler attractions, providing personal experiences, opinions, feedbacks, and criticisms (Milano et al., 2011). Thus this study investigated the determinants of social media appeal on potential tourists' intentions to visit the website or social network. This study assessed people who used the web to make vacation plans (traveling choices that were assembled with the assistance from social media networks).

In this study, the qualitative phase helped develop a modified proposed conceptual framework. Accordingly, fifteen interviews were conducted until saturation level of data was met. The analysis illustrated that in the Egyptian context, tourists are attracted to social media and actually go online to plan their trips. Social media encourages potential tourists to take their advice sincerely because non-commercial parties write the comments. These online sites attract people to visit because people can: *"view content, leave comments, like posts, share pictures,*

join conversations, and engage with contacts and fans, they become attracted to the source, using it as a guide for the traveling planning”.

The Internet has a remarkable impact on today's tourism. According the analysis of this study, the Internet can be used for receiving, looking for and sharing information to plan their travels. In addition, the Internet facilitates the communication between customers and touristic organizations to obtain information and purchase products. The Internet has provided a new distribution channel for the retail of tourist products and services. For the suppliers, the Internet is providing directly information of their customers helping to increase their sales. Therefore, businesses in the tourism industry should start to create and improve their sites in order to take advantage of the trend in costumer's behavior. For travelers, the Internet has become as an open door where they are able to find instruments to satisfy their needs and facilitate the purchases. The travelers do not have to face any dilemma about where to go, how to go and what to do; now they just have the Internet.

Based on the interviews, various variables were developed to know what impacts social media attractiveness. Correspondingly, the participants believed that potential tourists use social media because of its: virtual Existence (linking to other websites and its visibility in search engine), the published content (text, photos, videos, audios, and graphics), and the idea of social networking (user generated content, tailored recommendations, comments and opinions expressions, idea relevance, active chats and forums, quick and prompt responses, and the cooperative generation of information). Once the model was formed, the researcher postulated that these variables positively influence social media attractiveness in the touristic context.

Overall, these results provided rich insights that are beneficial for academics and practitioners in the field of the electronic commerce of the tourism industry (several tourism facilities- hotels, restaurants, and destinations). The findings in this study shed the realization of the key aspects of what constitutes in making social media attractive to potential tourists and provide insights into how the corresponding social media instruments are to be evaluated. Thus, this study provided practitioners with actual viewpoints of Egyptian citizens.

This study qualitative outcomes show that it is suggested that touristic industries develop existence in the virtual social network, illustrating (with the usage of pictures, text, videos and

audio) their hotels, national monuments, sightseeing locations, and contact. Touristic industries should use social media in order to have significantly more website visitors, which increases awareness worldwide (than those not using social media). Potential tourists who are web visitors increase their intentions to vacation, leading to more direct action and trips. Therefore, it is mentioned that these organizations create compelling and interactive social media experience for the potential tourists that encourage guest interaction, leading to direct actions in taking the trip. Making social media appealing is critical to turning potential tourists into social media bookers.

The practical implications shows that once a touristic industry builds a Web site, it must give people a reason to come. A Web site is a passive form of marketing: providing a notice, which points visitors to your products and services. The elements of the appeal to touristic websites were identified in this study. Organizations *must advertise their Web site to Web search engines* that index the Web, such as Google, Yahoo, and InfoSeek. Second, organizations must *give people a good reason to visit the website*. The Websites should take time to provide up-to-date information. They will find people returning again and again to the site, each time increasing their chances of doing business with you. Likewise, Websites should become *active in several Internet news groups and mailing lists*. If people believe they can find out more about the products or services by looking on-line, many will do so.

This study had several limitations. The first was the small size of the sample and the fact that participants were in a single area, the metropolitan cities of Egypt. The present study used only qualitative research approach. This next limitation is regarding the sampling technique. This study used purposive sampling, a source of convenience sampling, making the end results not truly representative. Thus, future studies can add on to this study by using quantitative approaches, such as administrated questionnaires. They can use probability-sampling techniques to further validate this study. For upcoming research, a larger sample is needed and the data should be gathered proportionately from all regions of the country.

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