



# The role of Social Media in Various Travel Decision-making Stages

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## ABSTRACT

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This study aimed to determine the role of social media in various travel decision-making stages of tourists. Another goal of the research was to determine the tourists' aim to use social media at each stage before, during and after the trip. The present study was applied in terms of goal and qualitative regarding methodology, carried out with the phenomenological approach. The statistical population included 25 tourists from Turkey, who traveled to Ukraine in summer 2018 through Ati Travel Agency. The sample size was determined using the data saturation criterion, and after data collection, the Dickman Method was exploited to analyze the data. Following several analyses and comparing the key points, we extracted four items of "being inspired to travel", "reading others' comments about the hotels, restaurants and tourist attractions", "sharing photos and videos of the trip destination", and "learning about special offers and discounts" as the goals of using the social media before travel. In addition, four items of "decision-making about the next destination", "expressing one's feelings and characteristics", "achieving information" and "selecting the most appropriate recreation plans" were recognized as goals of using social media during travel. Finally, three items of "helping others find their travel destination", "sharing bad experiences and preventing their reoccurrence", and "expressing one's feelings and characteristics" were identified as the goals of using social media after travel.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been significant growth in the use of social media and the development of internet-based technologies worldwide. These rapid changes affect businesses and activity methods. Information and communications technology (ICT) has had considerable impacts on the tourism industry, generating new concepts in the field, such as tourism 2.0 (Xiang, 2014). The Internet has fundamentally transformed tourists' methods of access to information and techniques used to plan a journey (Buhalis and Law, 2008). In the past, people who wanted to travel would go to travel agencies to obtain information about the place. Travel agencies would also assist tourists in areas such as booking accommodation and transportation. With the advent of Internet-based technologies and the rise of social media, the travel experience has changed completely for tourists. Today, tourists can receive any information online, which has changed them from passive consumers to an active audience (Sigala et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding the impact of social media on the tourism industry is of paramount importance. This study aimed to evaluate the goals of using social media before, during and after a trip to obtain collective information about the effect of social media on various decision-making stages of a trip.

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## 2. Theoretical Foundations

### *2.1. Word-of-mouth marketing*

Nowadays, word-of-mouth marketing has been recognized as a way to affect the beliefs of people, who no longer trust advertisements. In fact, word-of-mouth marketing refers to interpersonal relations regarding the personal experiences and assessments of individuals. Many studies have shown that word-of-mouth marketing is more effective, compared to communication through other sources such as tips in important newspapers contents or advertisements. The reason for this higher effectiveness is the belief in the provision of valid comparative information in the word-of-mouth marketing approach. The word-of-mouth marketing has the highest level of persuasion and credibility in the tourism market (Leung et al., 2013) since people cannot have an accurate evaluation of the service quality at their destiny before arriving. In other words, it is extremely difficult to judge the quality of a destination before traveling. Therefore, reading and viewing the interests and experiences of others about tourism destinations on social media reduces travel risks (Luo and Zhong, 2013).

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## 2.2. Online Word-of-Mouth Marketing

The emergence of web 2.0 has transformed the word-of-mouth marketing and has led to online word-of-mouth marketing. Introduced by O'Reilly (2005), the concept of web 2.0 refers to the second generation of Internet-based services. Websites established based on web 2.0 can be turned into platforms applied by users to communicate with each other, which is in contrast to the web 1.0 technology, where users could only observe a huge flood of information (Rathonyi, 2013). This form of Internet transformations in the past few years has enabled users to be active in the construction and sharing content. Therefore, users who have no face-to-face interactions with each other are eager to make interactions in online societies to meet their information needs through the content shared by others (Tan and Chen, 2012). As pointed out by Turban et al. (2010), web 2.0 is interpreted as creating greater collaboration and interaction among Internet users. In fact, social media, blogs, and forums are new ways, in which people can share information with each other.

According to Henning-Thurau (2004), word-of-mouth marketing is any type of positive or negative opinion expressed by potential, current, or past customers of a company or product provided to a huge number of people via web 2.0. This type of advertising has become an important area of consumer opinion, and its efficiency is higher than word-of-mouth marketing in the offline world due to its higher availability.

## 2.3. Tourism 2.0

A new concept known as tourism 2.0 was created with the emergence of blogs, forums, and social media. This concept is defined as implementing the technology of web 2.0 on the tourism foundation. Mendez et al. (2015) marked that tourism 2.0 is a new Internet model to obtain, publish and share information with tourists. The emergence of online word-of-mouth marketing has affected the tourism industry in two ways:

- 1) Tourists can update their information and improve their perceptions of a destination with the extensive provision of information by several users. The social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) are multipurpose and dynamic platforms used by users to share their interests with others (Luo and Zhong, 2013).
- 2) Online media has fundamentally changed the way tourists have access to information. The Internet is cyberspace in which many audiences seek information to make decisions about tourism and accommodation through communication and content produced by others (Yazdanifard and Yee, 2014).

## 2.4. Tourists' Decision-making Process

The customer behavior area is a difficult field for research, and the level of complexity is higher in the tourism field due to the emotional nature of people's decisions. The traveling behavior generally encompasses interconnected processes and concepts that can never be evaluated separately (Cohen et al., 2014).

The tourists' decision-making process includes three sections: the "before traveling" stage is when tourists realize that they need a trip and start searching and collecting information. The alternatives are assessed when sufficient information is gathered, and the second stage (actual traveling experience) occurs after the end of the search for a place. The final stage happens after the trip, where tourists share their experiences with others.

In order to avoid making poor destination decisions, tourists usually evaluate and select different information sources during their travel planning process (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002).

## 3. Methodology

This was an applied research in terms of goal and a qualitative study carried out with a phenomenological approach, the main approach of which is describing the social life experiences as occurred in real life of people. One of the best ways to apply the phenomenological approach is to answer the question of whether there is a need for further clarification of a particular phenomenon or not. Therefore, since the role of the social media in various travel decision-making stages has yet to be properly determined, and with regard to the paucity of research in this field, the current study applied the phenomenological method to evaluate 19 tourists from Turkey, who traveled to Ukraine through Ati Travel Agency in summer 2018. Notably, the data saturation criterion was considered to measure the sample size.

Interviews with the subjects continued until saturation using the targeted data sampling method. In other words, the statements of the participants were similar to the 19th person onward. In total, 19 interviews were performed with open and semi-structured questions. It is worth noting that the researcher received the participants' permission to record their voice before the interviews. The duration of interviews varied from 20 to 40 minutes, each started with a general and open question with the theme of "how do you use social media at various travel stages". Afterwards, follow-up questions such as "could you elaborate more?" were asked to have an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. In this study, the mean age of the subjects was 40 years, and eight participants were female and the rest were male. In terms of the level of education, 11 participants had academic degrees. Regarding marital status, 15 individuals were married and four were single.

The results were analyzed by the Dickman method, which includes seven stages, as follows: 1) reading the interviews to obtain a general idea of the concept, 2) writing descriptive summaries and searching for topics, 3) analyzing the transcribed text in the form of a group work for a descriptive topic, 4) referring to the text or participants to explain specific topics, 5) comparing texts to determine the common meanings and joint works, 6) determining patterns related to the topics, and 7) asking the interpreter group and other colleagues to provide suggestions for the final model (Abedi, 2009). The thematic coding method was applied after the accurate and complete transcribing of interviews for data analysis since it is used based on Strauss effect (1987) for comparative studies. The result of this process was a set of categories used for the analysis of individual items. However, the categories were elaborated using open coding, where the data and phenomena are conceptualized and the text is encoded sentence by sentence, based on Flick in the book of "An Introduction to Qualitative Research". Afterwards, the codes are classified based on the phenomena discovered in the data precisely related to the

research question. Ultimately, the obtained categories are elaborated, and the key points of interviews are conceptualized after collecting the data that are based on an example of the coding table (Allen, 2003).

The validity and accuracy of the present study were rooted in four axes of real value, applicability, stability, and being based on reality. In this regard, the real value means that the statement resulting from experience is acceptable to the person who has actually experienced it. This was realized in the present study by referring to the participants and approving the statements. On the other hand, applicability means whether the results of the research can be used in other groups or places or not. To achieve this goal, the researchers attempted to select participants with an extensive range of demographic characteristics. Stability was achieved when participants provided homogeneous answers to similar questions posed in different formats. Finally, being based on reality was obtained when the research process was unbiased and the researchers attempted to avoid any bias in the phenomenon under investigation before and after the interviews.

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## 4. Results

In this study, phenomenological interviews were conducted with 19 subjects (11 male and 8 female individuals) in line with the research goal, which was the evaluation of the role of social media in various travel decision-making stages. Following data analysis and several times of analyzing and comparing the key points, four, four, and three items were extracted for the dimensions of using the social network “before travel”, “during travel” and “after travel”, respectively.

### 4.1. Using Social Media “Before Travel”

Data analysis revealed that the subjects had various goals in using social media before travel. In this regard, most participants (52%) used social media to be inspired for their next trip while 28% of the subjects applied social media to read the comments of others regarding hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions. In addition, 24% of the subjects used social media to express their personal feelings, whereas 32% of the participants applied this feature to find special offers and discounts.

1) Being inspired to travel: one of the goals of using social media was “being inspired”. For instance, one of the participants stated: “I am a huge fan of Instagram and I explore it whenever I have time. I look at the pictures of others and am always excited to see amazing pictures taken from across the world. When I see others’ travel photos, I want to go there myself and see its beauty up close. I saw so many pictures of Turkey that I was inspired to travel to this country last summer.”

2) Reading others’ comments about hotels, restaurants and tourist attractions: another topic extracted from interviews was using social media to “read the others’ comments about hotels, restaurants and tourist attractions”. For example, one of the participants stated: “in this past, I would go to travel agencies to choose hotels and tourist attractions because I thought that they have sufficient experience in the field. Today, I refer to the social media to see the pictures of hotels and their facilities and reading people’s comments about them. I even go to several different media and read people’s comments at once to ensure the validity of the comments.”

3) Sharing photos and videos of the travel destination: another goal extracted from the interviews was people’s desire to share the photos and videos of their destination before travel. In this regard, one of the participants stated: “my friend and I were recently graduated from university. Therefore, we wanted to make our first summer after graduation memorable. Thus, we started publishing photos of İzmir, Turkey even before our trip to let the whole world know that we were finally going to a foreign country”.

4) Learning about special offers and discounts: another reason for using social media was “to learn about special offers and discounts”. In this regard, one of the interviewees stated: “wherever I want to go, I first search for the advertisement hashtag to see how I can manage my travel expenses and take advantage of the special offers and discounts available in that season”.

### 4.2. Using Social Media “during Travel”

A small number of interviewees (32%) used social media during travel to be engaged in different activities. In this regard, difficult or lack of access to the Internet was another reason for this issue. Moreover, the “goal” and “duration of the trip” were factors affecting the possibility of using social media during travel. Long and multi-purpose trips are much more likely for people to use social media during their travels and to plan their next destination. In total, 36% of the subjects shared pictures and information about their travel on social media to express their personal feelings. Furthermore, 28% of the subjects used social media at this stage to obtain information. In addition, social media was used by 32% of the subjects while traveling to choose the most appropriate program from a variety of entertainment and programs.

1) Deciding about the next destination: one of the goals of using social media in this section is “deciding about the next destination”. One of the participants shared her/his experience of travel to Turkey: “when I was in Istanbul this summer, I was starting to regret that it since the city was so crowded and chaotic. So, I went to the hotel and started browsing social media, where I saw pictures of Goreme, which is a mountainous city in Turkey. Since I love hiking, I was on my way to the city an hour later”.

2) Expressing feelings: another goal of using social media during travel is “expressing feelings”. In this regard, one of the interviewees stated: “since my spouse and I are vegetarians, we have limited choices for our dinner and lunch in Ukraine, which has really saddened us. This year, we traveled to Kuşadası and were really excited about the diversity of vegetarian food. Therefore, we took pictures everywhere and talked about our emotions”.

3) Obtaining information: another goal expressed by the participants was “obtaining information” through social media during travel. For instance, one of the subjects marked: “My friend and I were traveling abroad for the first time. As soon as we arrived in Istanbul, we realized that in addition to not being

familiarized with places, we not even know where to go. Therefore, we immediately got access to the internet and started to find out about Istanbul's attractions”.

4) Selecting the most appropriate recreational programs: another goal of using social media during travel was “selecting the best recreational programs”. In this respect, one of the participants affirmed: “my spouse and I always have disputes during travel since she/he forgets that we have a limited budget and cannot spend our money inconsiderately. This time, I tried to find the right recreational programs in Turkey via Instagram, so maybe I could manage our trip that way”.

#### 4.3. Using Social Media “after Travel”

According to the interviewees, the main cause of using social media after travel was expressing opinions about the trip and sharing experiences with others. Most participants (68%) expressed that most of the time, they post comments on social media after the trip. The information shared at this stage significantly helps other tourists decide about their travel destination. In this respect, 64% of participants expressed that they would share pictures and opinions on social media in case of a bad experience so that others would know about it. Furthermore, 52% of the participants expressed their feelings by sharing pictures and opinions on social media.

1) Helping others select their travel destination: one of the goals of the interviewees was “helping others to select their travel destination”. For example, one of the subjects stated: “usually when I return from a trip, I write a friendly comment about where I went and talk about its pros and cons. At times, I have also noticed that my opinions have influenced my friends' travel destination choices and they have gone where I have recommended them”.

2) Sharing a bad experience and preventing its reoccurrence: this was another reason for using the social media by the subjects, one of whom stated: “I had never posted a comment on social media after my trip. But this year, my purse and money were stolen on the second day of my trip to Turkey. I was so angry that I wrote about as much as I could so that it would not happen to others”.

3) Expressing personal feelings: another goal of sharing content on social media was “expressing personal feelings”. One of the subjects expressed: “honestly, after returning from Turkey, I tried to post photos from time to time to show others that are more interested in foreign trips than domestic trips.”

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of social media on the travel decision-making process. To achieve this goal, we evaluated the motivations behind using social media at three before, during and after travel stages. The travel decision-making process is a multistage process that consists of different parts, each sector of which involves making complex decisions by tourists. To this end, they need specific information. Due to the intangible nature of the product in the tourism sector which is its destination and entertainment, it is very difficult to judge and describe the specifics of this product. With the advent of Internet-based technologies and the rise of social media, tourists have found new ways to express their experiences and views about their trip destination. The data obtained from the interviews showed that the subjects used social media before travel to “be inspired”, “search for information”, “use special offers and discounts” and “express their personal feelings”. During travel, the participants used social media to “select tourist attractions” of the destination, “express their personal feelings”, “search for information” and “select the most appropriate recreational programs”. After travel, the participants applied social media to “express their personal feelings” and “share their bad experiences with others to avoid their reoccurrence”.

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