User-generated content (UGC) in pleasure travel decision-making
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Web 2.0 has enabled people to create their own on-line information (user-generated content) and share it easily through social networks. This growth of social media has inevitably impacted on the way consumers’ research and buy products, with the travel and tourism sector in the vanguard of such change (O’Connor, 2010; Sotiriadis and van Zyl, 2013; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014; Sigala, 2014).

User-generated content (UGC) and social media, while pervasive, are recent phenomena. Research into how they affect consumer behaviour is growing rapidly; nevertheless, it is still in its infancy (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). This research seeks to build on the emergent body of work by exploring the use of UGC when decisions about a holiday are made.

UGC in the travel decision-making process; the literature
There is agreement in the literature that the advent of social media revolutionised online communication including word of mouth (WOM) recommendation by combining the reach of digital communication with a high level of trust in in the views expressed (Pehlivan et al., 2011; Tham et al., 2013; Hernandez-Mendez et al., 2013). This escalation effect means that electronic word of mouth (eWOM) reaches beyond traditional offline peer groups, to wider virtual networks (Livin et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2013; Sotiriadis and van Zyl, 2013). Furthermore the nature of social media not only moves customers from passive to active involvement with brands, by letting them voice opinions and engage with others, it also empowers customers and facilitates ‘vigilante marketing’ (Pehlivan et al., 2011; Hernandez-Mendez et al., 2013). As Leung et al (2013) note, because of its power and less controllable nature, social media is a challenge for travel businesses.

The perceived trustworthiness of third party information is a core reason why people use it in their decision making (Akehurst, 2008; Page and Pitt, 2011). Interestingly, while Cox et al (2009) found that UGC was not always deemed as credible as travel company information, more recent studies have shown greater trust in UGC than in information provided by travel company marketing departments (Lo et al., 2011; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014; Marine-Roig, 2014), particularly among frequent travellers (O’Connor, 2010). This infers a continuing growth in trust towards UGC at the expense of marketer generated content (MGC).

Another change appears to be when UGC is used. In 2009 Cox et al found that most travellers considered UGC after making a decision on destination for choosing accommodation. In contrast those writing more recently (such as Lo et al, 2011) conclude that UGC, especially travel blogs and reviews, does influence destination related decision-making. In particular UGC contributes to the image of destinations (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Jacobsen and Munar, 2012) something that destination marketing organisations now recognise and seek to use in their own social media campaigns (Hudson and Thal, 2013).

Further support for the use by consumers of UGC in searching for information about destinations, as well as about options available at the chosen destination, is found within studies investigating users of the travel review site tripadvisor.com. These show that reviews are used to obtain destination knowledge (Gretzel et al., 2007) and to generate ideas (Gretzel
and Yoo, 2008) and in the process trigger additional searching of other travel related products and services. But it is when evaluating a shortlist of choices that UGC, especially third party review sites for accommodation, is used most (O’Connor, 2010).

When seeking accounts of others’ travel experiences, the research remains consistent in showing that conclusions are drawn based upon perceptions of the author of the UGC (Gretzel, 2007; Hautz et al., 2013). Greater authority and preference is given to reviews if the reviewer appears well travelled or, in line with social identity theory, where the reviewer is perceived to share similar social identity or values (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Also relevant here is the importance attached to photographic images in pre-trip information gathering with user photographs being given more credence than marketing images (O’Connor, 2010).

However it is not only travel-specific platforms that are used in planning travel, although Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) claim they are of primary importance. General social networking sites are widely used especially by the under 35s (Lo et al., 2011) and students (Kim et al., 2013). This chimes with studies that emphasise the importance of recommendations from family and friends above all others (Jacobsen and Munar, 2012; Hernandez-Mendez et al., 2013).

According to Sotiriadis and van Zyl (2013), with increasing accessibility to internet services, not only is UGC created during a trip there is more and more real-time sharing of these consumption experiences. This provides organisations with the opportunity to tap into live service feedback and eWOM. In-trip digital information searches are also becoming more common with consumers using UGC when searching for things to do as well as places to visit and to eat (Gretzel et al., 2007; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

Post consumption evaluation of an experience like travel includes reliving and sharing it (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012). Social media provides a wide platform for this and provides eWOM in the form of user generated descriptive dialogue, reviews and sharing of images (Kang and Schuett, 2013; Hautz et al., 2014). Current insight suggests that online research continues post trip (Hudson and Thal, 2013) with many accessing reviews to compare experiences (Gretzel et al., 2007; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). There is also evidence that reviews are read for leisure after a trip and even independently of the whole trip planning process (Chen et al., 2014).

In summary, the extant literature confirms the revolutionary impact of social media on travel customer behaviour and includes studies that have started the analysis into the use of UGC in travel purchase decisions. But there is limited investigation into the detail of the pattern of use of UGC at the various stages of travel planning for different types of travel. The purpose of this exploratory study is, therefore, to add to the literature by examining how UGC is used in the particular context of pre-trip holiday decision-making. More specifically what UGC is used, why it is used and when it is used in the decision-making process.

**Methodology**

There were two elements to the primary research. The first element took an inductive approach (Saunders et al., 2012) and was designed to provide qualitative insight into interaction with UGC including thoughts and feeling around the information as well as detail on what was searched, when and how the information was used. To this end it comprised three case studies of real time diaries covering the pre-trip planning and booking of a holiday. Those completing the diaries were self-selecting and recruited through Facebook. The
participants were not required to be representative (Veal, 2011) and so it is acceptable that all three participants were female with one in their late 20s, one late 30s and one early 40s. The results of these diaries have value in their own right, and also helped inform the design of the questionnaire used in the second element of the primary research, an on-line survey.

Survey strategies are frequently used in studies of travel consumer behaviour (Darley et al, 2010). In this study non-probability snowball sampling was used with initial recruitment via email and social networking using Facebook, Google+ and Twitter. Potential respondents were directed to the questionnaire on Smart Survey via a link. Because of the nature of the study it was necessary for respondents to use the internet, even if just to a minimal extent, to plan or book their holiday. For this reason the first question in the questionnaire asked about use of the internet for this purpose and so acted as a qualification filter. In June 2014 the survey generated 150 responses of which 114 qualified and were usable. The questionnaire used a combination of list, category, ranking and rating questions.

Findings
The findings of the research are presented using the structure of the pre-trip holiday planning process starting with getting inspiration for the holiday. The diaries and the survey results are combined rather than reported separately. In this way the links in the findings of the two elements can be more clearly drawn into common themes.

At the start of the holiday planning process the diarists were searching for general inspiration and initially looked to friends and informed travellers via social networking not only for ideas but also for good sources of information. For one diarist, the youngest, once the type of trip had been decided the inspiration for a specific destination was dominated by UGC, principally user blogs and travel review sites. At this stage the other two added travel company web-sites and social media pages alongside user and travel reviews. For accommodation inspiration all diarists seemed to flick between UGC and MGC often checking up on company claims with user reviews and looking up user recommendations on company websites. But when it came to making the final choice on accommodation, all three diarists focussed on user reviews and user-generated video.

The three holidays covered by the diaries were very different and this shaped the specific sites visited. However in terms of types of sources, all three used Google searches, general social-media friends for WOM and user reviews (including in-site) from specialist travel review sites. Although the use of user blogs was much less than anticipated (with travel blogs hardly featuring at all) they were used throughout the holiday planning process and not confined to a particular stage.

As with the diarists, the survey sample confirmed that for most (70%) destination inspiration is through WOM of family and friends via social media. However, travel company information played a much bigger role than suggested by the diaries with 53% of respondents using it. When looking for ideas about accommodation user reviews (75%) alongside travel company information (56%) became the sources most used which reflected what was reported by the diarists. Also consistent with the diaries was that user reviews provided the main source of information (71%) for deciding between accommodation choices, with user-generated video being used by many more (42%) than in the earlier inspiration stages of travel planning when it hovered around 11%. However, the survey showed that although fewer than half used travel company information (42%) when making the final decision on accommodation, this is more than the diaries indicated. As far as travel blogs are concerned, the survey results reflected their limited use in the diaries with only 15% of respondents using
them for ideas on destination and even fewer when looking for accommodation (7%) and when choosing accommodation (6%).

The diaries also reported that user videos, accessed via YouTube, and blogs were used after booking but prior to travelling, both for recreation and for specific information. The motivations seemed to be to fuel the enjoyment from anticipation, confirm decisions and find out about the travel arrangements and the destination to be prepared and get the most from the holiday. Interestingly at this stage there was no use of travel company MGC by any of the three diarists. 77% of those completing the survey also sought information about their holiday after booking and before travelling. However, they demonstrated a departure from the behaviour of the diarists in using a wider spread of sources including MGC (27%) and in giving less emphasis to user videos and blogs (fewer than 20% used them).

The diaries provided insight into the attitudes and preferences towards UGC. User-generated sources were anthropomorphised by all diary participants in phrases such as ‘the first review was very me’. Similarly references were made towards the reviewers, as opposed to the review for example ‘they are usually written by kindred spirits’. Each diarist wanted different things from UGC depending on the type of holiday, however, all favoured practical information over reviewers’ subjective opinions ‘I prefer the reviews…about access to supermarkets and facilities on site…than if people liked it or not’. Despite negative comments about subjective opinion they all demonstrated a liking and distinct preference for UGC that used personal stories to convey useful information ‘I like it when people tell a bit of a story in their review’. In addition all valued images and videos for two reasons. First, trust in the veracity of the information ‘A video can’t really lie can it?’ and second, their power of communication ‘I know what I like and don’t like by looking at the photos’.

The survey picked up on the whole issue of trust. The findings support the statement that overall UGC receive higher levels of trust than MGC (Shapiro – Wilks p = <0.001). Within this overall picture there are differences in the trust placed in the various forms of travel information with males showing less trust in all sources except word-of-mouth. However, gender differences were not found to be statistically significant for any of the sources or overall as shown in Table One below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information sources</th>
<th>Males Median (Md)</th>
<th>Females Median (Md)</th>
<th>Test statistic (U)</th>
<th>z-approximation (z)</th>
<th>Null hypothesis probability statistic (p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Travel company descriptions</td>
<td>5.00 83</td>
<td>6.00 31</td>
<td>( U = 1,386.00 )</td>
<td>.642</td>
<td>.521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel company photographs</td>
<td>5.00 83</td>
<td>5.00 31</td>
<td>( U = 1,370.500 )</td>
<td>.542</td>
<td>.588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel company videos</td>
<td>5.00 82</td>
<td>5.50 30</td>
<td>( U = 1,412.500 )</td>
<td>1.221</td>
<td>.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel reviews - third-party websites</td>
<td>8.00 83</td>
<td>7.00 31</td>
<td>( U = 1,256.500 )</td>
<td>-.195</td>
<td>.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel reviews - travel company websites</td>
<td>6.00 83</td>
<td>7.00 31</td>
<td>( U = 1,578.000 )</td>
<td>1.887</td>
<td>.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User photographs</td>
<td>7.00 83</td>
<td>7.00 31</td>
<td>( U = 1,421.500 )</td>
<td>.874</td>
<td>.382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User videos</td>
<td>7.00 83</td>
<td>7.00 31</td>
<td>( U = 1,438.500 )</td>
<td>.981</td>
<td>.327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel blogs</td>
<td>6.00 81</td>
<td>6.00 30</td>
<td>( U = 1,144.500 )</td>
<td>-.476</td>
<td>.634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word-of-mouth</td>
<td>9.00 83</td>
<td>9.00 30</td>
<td>( U = 1,089.500 )</td>
<td>-1.045</td>
<td>.296</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again while there are differences in the levels of trust for the different sources between different age groups (see Table Two below), apart from in the area of travel blogs, none of these differences have statistical significance. For travel blogs however, there is a statistically significant difference in the trust afforded them by the 45+. This was revealed by the rejection of the null hypotheses of no difference between the age groups using Kruskal-Walls \( X^2 \) (2, n = 114) = 8.36, p = .015. Further analysis using Mann Whitney U tests found statistically significant differences between:
18-29yrs \((Md = 6.00, n = 34)\) and 45+yrs \((Md = 5.00, n = 28)\)
\[ U = 274.500, z = -2.890, p = .004, r = -.4, \text{ to medium effect} \]

30-44yrs \((Md = 6.00, n = 49)\) and 45+yrs \((Md = 5.00, n = 28)\)
\[ U = 492.500, z = -2.088, p = .037, r = -.2, \text{ with a small effect} \]

But no significant difference between 18-29yrs \((Md = 6.00, n = 34)\) and 30-44yrs \((Md = 6.00, n = 49)\), \[ U = 736.000, z = -.913, p = .361 \]

Table Two: Level of trust in information sources by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Level of trust of travel company descriptions</th>
<th>Level of trust of travel company photographs</th>
<th>Level of trust of travel company videos</th>
<th>Level of trust of travel reviews on third party websites</th>
<th>Level of trust of travel reviews on travel company websites</th>
<th>Level of trust of user photographs</th>
<th>Level of trust of user videos</th>
<th>Level of trust of travel blogs</th>
<th>Level of trust of WOM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.99</td>
<td>8.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>2.035</td>
<td>1.864</td>
<td>1.521</td>
<td>1.877</td>
<td>1.631</td>
<td>1.721</td>
<td>1.782</td>
<td>1.872</td>
<td>1.365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>7.31</td>
<td>6.57</td>
<td>7.19</td>
<td>6.61</td>
<td>6.96</td>
<td>8.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>2.116</td>
<td>2.112</td>
<td>1.978</td>
<td>1.982</td>
<td>1.826</td>
<td>2.063</td>
<td>2.245</td>
<td>2.045</td>
<td>1.740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>8.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>1.970</td>
<td>1.947</td>
<td>1.740</td>
<td>1.869</td>
<td>1.636</td>
<td>1.883</td>
<td>1.985</td>
<td>2.018</td>
<td>1.906</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

The study found that UGC does not necessarily replace MGC, rather it complements, which is consistent with previous studies (Gretzel et al., 2007; Sotiriadis and van Zyl, 2013; Standing et al., 2014). It also showed that travel company information remains a widely used source of information with far more people using it at each and every stage of holiday planning than use travel blogs. Indeed it was interesting, and unexpected, to discover how few people in the survey used travel blogs, especially when compared with the popularity of user reviews.

This study identified how the use of UGC and MGC changes throughout the holiday planning process. At the start of the process when inspiration is sought, the recommendations of family and friends (via social networking) are the most used source of information. But as the decision-making process moves to the final choice of accommodation the majority of people turn to user reviews. MGC is used alongside UGC, especially when looking for inspiration about accommodation. The diaries provide insight into the way people flick between the two to check out ideas and claims. These patterns appear to contradict Cox (2009) in terms of the early stage at which UGC is used but they are compatible with Hudson and Thal (2013).

The survey provided support for the argument that UGC is more trusted than MGC as expounded by Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) among others. In particular the research found that user photographs and videos are trusted more than the same media from travel companies which supports O’Connor (2010) that the level of trust in travel reviews on third party websites is higher than in travel reviews on travel company websites. This reinforces the interpretation that the link is between trust and source rather than trust and media. In addition the survey showed that trust varies across sources of UGC with travel blogs attributed the lowest level of trust of any UGC source. In fact travel blogs even elicited less trust than travel reviews on travel company websites, which may explain why the research found them to be so little used.
Apart from explicit issues of trust, the diaries suggested other reasons why some sources are preferred over others. These lie in the extent to which their style, coverage and format resonate with the person doing the holiday information gathering and whether they have been recommended by someone with whom they identify such as those in their social circle. This aligns with the work of Kusumasondjaja et al. (2012) and Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) that similarly identifies the relevance of perceptions of UGC authors in decision making. The diaries add to this by uncovering how the diarists anthropomorphised UGC and how they identified with content authors by projecting onto them their own attitudes and opinions.

The research also identified the period between booking and going on holiday as an important one for undertaking additional information searches for both recreation and practical purposes, especially around departure planning. The behaviour appears to be driven by the combined influence of the desire to extend the experience though the enjoyment of anticipation; the need for reassurance around the holiday that has been booked and the experience it will deliver and wanting to be appropriately prepared for both the travel and the holiday.

Although there were variations among people in the sources, preferences and attitudes towards information sources, the diaries demonstrated more similarity than differences and few of the differences to emerge from the survey had any statistical significance. This remarkable consistency suggests that the picture to emerge of engagement with UGC from this study has credibility. However, as with all exploratory research it generates as many questions as it answers and opens as many avenues for research as it addresses. For example, the unexpected lack of use of travel blogs in planning a family holiday. More research is required to understand this result and how travel blogs are perceived and used alongside other UGC and MGC by different types of travellers for different types of travel.

For the travel industry the research identifies key behaviour around UGC during travel planning that companies need to monitor and harness. The importance of trust is highlighted pointing to the need for MGC to be honest and have integrity. This combines with the opinions expressed in the case-study diaries on style, tone and materials of sources that might also be used to develop MGC that draws in consumers. The study also shows that MGC is used alongside UGC, so that marketers should look to discover ways that it can be shaped to fit with UGC and suit better the way consumers engage with these sources. Another important finding for designing content is the use by consumers of both MGC and UGC during the period after booking but before travel which previous research has not highlighted. It is by bringing together content created by users and by marketers in ways that have value that the benefits of marketing co-creation can start to be leveraged.
References


