Travel information online: navigating correspondents, consensus, and conversation

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Abstract:

Travel information exists in paper guides, word of mouth, and countless websites. Organizing a trip has never been more accessible and simultaneously riddled with doubt. Professional journalists produce travel journalism while often anonymous reviewers on TripAdvisor provide their commentaries, and in between there are blogs, wikis, tourism boards, vendors, and a host of other information sources available. How does the 21st century tourist make sense of all of this information? Through a study of tourists in Paris, this study seeks to understand the methods and strategies that they employ in order to identify trustworthy and useful information. Interviews with a sample of travelers reveals that each person has their own unique process guided by their personal motivations, but they also share several practices along the way. This research reveals that tourists ultimately exhibit a multistep process of verification using both professional and non-professional sources. No one type of author or website appears to be a unique or singular influencer when it comes to primary or trustworthy sources. These findings will lead to larger discussions about destination management and transparent practices among information providers.

Keywords: travel journalism, planning, destination image, tourism experience, authenticity

As more individuals travel, the resources at their disposal on the internet continue to increase. Booking and review websites offer an array of information alongside traditional media, travel blogs, and other sources. Internet use has saturated travel planning, with travelers of all ages proving comfortable with researching on travel websites (Xiang, Magnini, Fesenmaier, 2015). While much research focuses on travel writing and journalism (Buzard, 1997; Blanton, 1997; Bertho-Lavenir, 1999; Hanusch, 2009; Greenman, 2012; Youngs, 2013; McGaurr, 2015), little research focuses on how individuals interpret and trust this information in a digital age.

This research seeks to identify the ways that tourists consume information when visiting a specific destination, in this case, Paris. Though limited in scope, this letter suggests ways to go forward studying online travel planning. Along with professional sources, like journalists, travel planning is now also facilitated by websites like Yelp and TripAdvisor, forms of digital word of mouth (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2006; Jeong, Holland, Jun, Gibson, 2011; Alton and Snehasish, 2013; Öztüren, 2013). While tourists share certain practices, individuals have their own preferences when searching travel information (Fodness and Murray, 1998). Identifying these practices can lead to a better understanding of what constitutes useful information in a digital age, and how a destination’s image is shaped by sources beyond the control of the tourist bureau (Pan, Maclaurin, Crotts, 2007; Akehurst, 2009; Hsu, Chen, Ting, 2012, Elliot and Lange-Faria, 2012; Cardon, 2014)

The research presented here focuses on a sample of 16 tourists who were actively organizing a trip to Paris through the second half of 2014. Participants were selected from 415 responses to an online questionnaire about travel planning, targeting those who plan their trips with internet sources. The questionnaire was shared by Paris bloggers and through the researcher’s personal and professional network in June 2014. Though not representative of all travelers, the questionnaire helped identify those who were currently conducting online research for a trip to Paris who were willing to participate in face to face interviews. Sixteen such individuals responded to requests for interviews and twelve were recorded in Paris upon each tourist’s arrival, while four others were recorded via Skype prior to departure. This research builds upon earlier studies on tourists and information consumption (Gretzel, 2007; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009, Jensen and Hjalager, 2012; Kah and Lee, 2015). The following sections highlight four key paths to future study, namely the main travel motivations, the primary source of information, the verification process, and trust construction for travelers planning a trip online.

Motivations

 First, tourists explained their specific motivations behind their travel planning that orient their research. While this study did not specifically target any one sort of traveler, those who had already been to Paris did confirm that their priorities shifted the second or third time they visit, as demonstrated by Freytag (2010).

 The majority of tourists, having already visited Paris, report looking for more “local” or “Parisian” experiences, seeking to distinguish their travel from the masses. Tourists evoke the idea of authenticity, as discussed by MacCannell (1976) and Urbain (1991). The idea of a true authentic experience, while impossible according to MacCannell, depends on the individual according to Wang (1999). In discussing different types of authenticity in tourism, Wang describes the notion of existential authenticity, a quest for tourists’ “authentic selves” instead of something more objectively authentic (1999, p. 360). Tourists report not being able to find these authentic experiences online – be it on blogs or other sites – though websites like AirBnB do position themselves as offering authenticity. They are looking for information that will lead them to something potentially authentic, like a lesser-known neighborhood, but do not premeditate each experience. These larger questions are the subject of numerous studies and debates (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Redfoot, 1984; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Further study, however, into the objective and constructive forms of authenticity, described by Wang, and their relationship to these websites touting authentic experiences would help shed light on these questions.

More concretely, travelers’ motivations seem profoundly dependent on their personal experiences and needs. They seek information corresponding to budgets or desired geographic locations, with some tourists motivated to research according to a trip’s duration, investing less time in preparing shorter trips. These motivations are sometimes – but not unanimously – reflected in the primary and secondary sources of information used by the tourists.

Primary Sources

 While far from homogenous among the sample, there were some commonalities when asked about their primary source of travel information. Respondents largely reported using search engines are their departure point for travel research. Travelers will then select from the results according to the webpages provided by Google, Yahoo, or a similar search engine, but with no specific patterns, and without fully understanding the algorithms that dictate which pages were presented first. This method, according to the travelers, allows them to get an overview, including major attractions and other keywords to research later. Similar studies on tourist behavior also identified Google and search engines as main sources for finding information (Mariussen, Ibenfeldt, & Vespestad 2014).

 Few travelers begin their planning with a specific publication or website, though several cited the *Rick Steves* travel guides, TripAdvisor, and *The New York Times*. Their starting point, additionally, does not seem to correspond necessarily to their motivations. In other words, somebody looking for a more authentic experience may use a mass media website, a blog, or TripAdvisor while someone less interested in authenticity may use the same sources. While there is no clear consensus on where to start, the interviews revealed more common practices when it comes to further research once the travel planning process begins. No one source – journalistic nor amateur – is an ultimate authority, and readers reach conclusions “based not so much on objectivity as on collective subjectivity” (Duffy 2014, 103).

Verification Process

 Secondary sources vary from tourist to tourist, depending on which types of sources they start with, be it a news site, a review site, or a blog for example. Whatever the order of consultation, tourists report comparing their findings among different sites, including TripAdvisor, Yelp, blogs, and news outlets not only to get a breadth of opinion, but to verify the timeliness and accuracy of primary sources. Tourists seek a consensus in their travel experiences and attempt to reduce doubt as much as possible before finalizing each purchasing decision. Nearly every interview subject describes using secondary sources to check their initial findings before they make any decisions. For example, if a hotel selected from a magazine does not rate well on TripAdvisor, or if a highly ranked restaurant does not get good reviews in a newspaper, travelers will tend to discard the address, preferring not to risk disappoint in the wake of conflicting reports. Thus, instead of looking for a variety of different suggestions on TripAdvisor and a news site, they are looking to hone their choices from their preliminary sources down to those which are most consistently positive across all different types of websites.

These online sources ranged from news and magazine sites to forums, social medial, and official tourism websites. All of these various sources exhibit a clear lack of domination in the travel planning process, with tourists preferring to confirm their findings independently instead of trusting one single source. No one type of information – be it user-generated or journalistic– seems to dictate entirely a destination’s image among the sample. Both are used at various times of travel planning. Each tourist has a personal process to comb through both, arriving at their own conclusion based on their values and needs.

Creating Trust

 The question of trust is another factor where travelers exhibit common practices. The interviewees do not put 100% stock in any one website, travel guide, or agent. While word of mouth is important, the evolution of electronic word of mouth has made it easier for individuals to seek pertinent information from online sources. Bloggers, therefore, can fulfil this need, becoming trusted sources through their intimate storytelling and social network presence (Pirolli, 2015). While some blogs fail to identify clearly their authors, many offer biographic details and photographs of the author, helping further to establish a connection with readers. Bloggers can be active on social media, further creating a relationship with their audience.

Respondents report using a host of user-generated review sites during their travel planning. On sites such as TripAdvisor, there is far less information available about the authors writing reviews and critiques. Nevertheless, interviewees interpret these review sites as the “voice of the people,” a sort of public consensus (Beauvisage et al., 2014). In general, respondents do believe that the majority of reviews are credible, and they develop strategies to establish perceived credibility. One key element is the presence of numbers and figures. The number of comments shared by a reviewer, the number of critiques for a particular experience, or the amount of helpful votes by other users for a particular review are all possible indicators of trust on TripAdvisor for those interviewed. By comparison, badges, which motivate contributors to create reviews on these sites (Schhuckert, Liu, & Law, 2016), are not viewed as trustworthy by most tourists who cited the low level of engagement needed to achieve them. Tourists look to the dates of the reviews, the number of reviews created by the most recent commentators, or at the hometown of the person writing the review in order to judge the information on each website.

Additionally, the quality of the writing plays a major role for many of those interviewed. While some hesitated, or apologized for judging the writing of others, what’s clear is that reviews are perceived as more trustworthy when the writing is of higher quality. These are just some of the practices that tourists have in common in constructing trust when, ultimately, there is no way to know who wrote a review, what motivated them, or if it was an authentic critique at all. More pointed studies on these various practices are needed to explore trust establishment further.

Discussion

 The multiple steps taken by those interviewed are aimed directly at reducing doubt in their decision making process (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011; Urbany, Dickson, & Wilkie, 1989). Travel is costly, and the majority of those who plan a vacation and use these websites will want to be sure that their restaurants, hotels, tours, and other experiences fit their expectations and budgets.

 While professional media offer trustworthy information according to interviewees, they don’t always offer the opinions and anecdotes that are important for readers. As consumer journalists, travel journalists need to treat their public as consumers of travel experiences (Hanusch, 2014) and this means exploring personal experiences. Word of mouth, still an important tool for travel planning (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011), can take its electronic form on TripAdvisor. Though as researchers point out, “a diet of nothing but commentary increases the volume of discourse without necessarily adding to its quality” (Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007). As already explained, however, with a deliberate and informed reading of these websites, travelers can find the information that they need and deem trustworthy to help make their decisions.

Traditional news outlets work alongside non-professionals as a process, described by Robinson (2011). The “transportive and transactional attributes” involve professionals and audience members who work together to create a continual process of news creation, instead of a final product (Robinson, 2011). For travel information, this transactional process seeks to reduce doubt, to empower citizens as consumers, as described by Hanusch (2014). Sites like blogs and TripAdvisor prove valuable, even if the information emanates from anonymous sources or amounts only to complaints (Vasquez, 2011). This research illustrates how readers are aware of some shortcomings of travel information published by both professional and non-professionals, prompting them to be more exhaustive and deliberate in their planning. While they still implicitly trust journalistic brands as far as providing verified information, this trust does not translate to *good* information. A complex combination of verification, word of mouth sources, and often arbitrary rankings on sites like TripAdvisor all aid in reducing the doubt that motivates travelers to plan their spending decisions in the first place.

 Moreover, while this study sheds light on tourists as consumers, it also presents an understanding of how they act in the information flow surrounding a destination. By mixing professional and non-professional sources without valuing one more than another, the destination’s image, in this case, Paris, is subject to numerous factors beyond the tourism board’s control. Some researchers point to the positive aspects of social media and blogging for destination management (Hays et al., 2013; Sevin, 2013; Mariani et al., 2014), but they do not uniformly take into consideration the lack of control that tourism offices have online. Destination management organizations face a difficult task of policing this material and ensuring that it corresponds to the desired – or even accurate – image of the destination.

 Understanding how these travelers inform themselves can lead to better communication overall between destinations and their tourists as mediated by professional and non-professional authors. This letter suggests just a few ways to continue studying travelers’ online behavior planning their experiences, and further research will continue to clarify these processes.

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