

**TURKISH TOURISM CONSUMER'S INFORMATION SEARCH BEHAVIOR: THE ROLE OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN TRAVEL PLANNING PROCESS****Burcu Selin YILMAZ***Dokuz Eylül University, Faculty of Business, Kaynaklar Campus, 35160 Buca, Izmir, Turkey  
selin.yilmaz@deu.edu.tr***Abstract**

*Consumer's decision-making process has been altered by dissemination of social networking sites (SNSs) provided by Web 2.0 technologies. Communication and interaction among consumers in SNSs allow consumers share their opinions and view others' opinions in their networks. The emergence of sites has highlighted the significance of electronic word-of-mouth since user-generated content (UGC) has become a source of information for consumers searching for information on products and services. UGC plays an important role in travel planning of prospective travelers, especially in information search phase. In this study, after a review of the relevant literature, the researcher aims to investigate how user-generated content are used and perceived by tourism consumers during decision making process and the role of user-generated content as a source of travel information. To achieve a better understanding about how the user-generated content was used and perceived by tourism consumers during their travel-related information search and more widely travel planning process, an exploratory study was designed based on the results of previous studies. The results of a survey conducted online suggest that tourism consumers benefit from information provided by different forms of user-generated content in their information search during the first stages of their travel planning process mainly.*

**Key words:** *consumer behavior in tourism; consumer's decision-making in tourism; electronic word-of-mouth; travel planning; user-generated content.*

**JEL Classification:** *M31, M39, Z33*

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Due to the proliferation of the Internet and dissemination of networked computers, digital social networks have provided a basis for interaction by which individuals can make their thoughts and views accessible to all users of the Internet, and millions of Internet users communicate through online social networks, exchange information, and share their opinions and experiences with the others (Dellarocas, 2003; Thorson and Rodgers, 2006). The relationships in today's society which are recognized to exist in networks of kin, friends, professional colleagues, and other community members are created mostly online (Müller, 1999; Rheingold, 2000; Pigg and Crank, 2004). Therefore, the power of connecting people who have been writing about products and services on blogs, sharing their opinions on a specific subject or talking about brands, experiences on Twitter and Facebook has been rising (Li and Bernoff, 2008).

Web 2.0 technology, mainly the social media, allow consumers to shape public perceptions of products and services by using user generated content (McConnell and Huba, 2007). Individuals, who share their knowledge, opinions, observations, and experience with their connected others through social media, have a power to shape consumer culture and preferences. Individuals could not only be persuaded by advertisers, the others (family members, acquaintances, and even strangers) contacted with and talked to every day are considered as noteworthy and influential sources of opinion and information about products, services, brands, and vote choice (Thorson and Rodgers, 2006).

Social media allows individuals to interact with other people in all around the world based on their interests. Recent developments of information and communication technologies enable consumers in tourism, which is a highly information-intensive industry (Benckendorff et al., 2014; Poon, 1993), to produce and share information. Maser and Weiermair (1998: 107) suggests that "information can be treated as one of the most or even the most important factor influencing and determining consumer behavior." Social media, a group of Internet-based communication-based applications supplied by the Web 2.0 platform, provides consumers a valuable tool to interact and communicate with others (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Development of Web 2.0 technologies has allowed tourists to share their travel-related experiences, their knowledge and observations through social media (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). Electronic word-of mouth from social media has an impact on travel planning process of tourism consumers (Pan et al., 2007).

## II. ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication can be defined as interpersonal communication among consumers concerning their personal experiences with a firm or a product (Richins, 1983). Before the advent of the Internet research on word-of-mouth communication has focused on interpersonal (or face-to-face) interaction (Anderson, 1998; Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rogers, 1983), radical changes have occurred in the field of communication due to the advancements in information and communication technologies and computer-mediated communication has become very important in information search and decision-making process of consumers (Dellarocas, 2003; Kozinets, 2002).

Since electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) provides customers both social and economic value individuals have different motivations in using or generating eWOM (Balasubramanian and Mahajan, 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Eight different motivations for online information and opinion seeking before purchasing a product or a service have been identified (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Cheong and Morrison, 2008): reducing risk, imitating behaviors of others, obtaining lower prices, accessing easy information, accidental/unplanned, because it is cool, stimulation by offline inputs such as TV, and getting prepurchase information.

The Internet has offered a very suitable medium to word-of-mouth communication and rising number of people have begun writing about and sharing their opinions and experiences online. The advent of Web 2.0 technology provides the development of a unique platform, called as social media, for communication and information exchange (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Saperstein and Hastings, 2010; Wigmo and Wikström, 2010). While Web 1.0, as the first stage of development of the World Wide Web, does not provide a medium for interactive and user-generated content, Web 2.0 or social media allows users to share their ideas and opinions easily and interactively. Social media has many different types such as wikis, blogs, microblogs (Twitter), social networking sites (Facebook), media-sharing sites (YouTube, Flickr), consumer review sites (TripAdvisor), and voting sites (Fischer and Reuber, 2011). Broadband connections combined with user generated media -blogs, podcasts, videos and other free and readily available tools- offer to people the opportunity of having voice by the help of Web 2.0 social media to shape public perceptions of products and services (McConnell and Huba, 2007).

The World Wide Web powered by Web 2.0 together with e-mail facilitates information dissemination and seeking (Stromer-Galley, 2003; Williams and Trammell, 2005). Interactive web-based communication allows the Internet users to control their access through the use of hyperlinks, to contribute a site, and to go beyond passive exposure (Williams and Trammell, 2005).

Electronic word-of-mouth stemmed from the social media is benefited in the three phases of the traveler's travel planning process including pre-trip, during-trip and post-trip. The social media usage in these three phases has been topics of research related to the tourism consumer behavior.

## III. ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS (OSNs) AND TRAVEL PLANNING IN TOURISM

Online social networks allow people to find other people with similar interests and to share their ideas, opinions, and experiences with them in a cyber environment (Ellison et al., 2014; Majchrzak et al., 2013). Online social networks as virtual platforms provided by Web 2.0 technology create a basis for user-generated content which allows people to share and exchange travel and tourism information (Bradley et al., 2015; Kandampully et al., 2015; Law et al., 2014; Morosan et al., 2014). As innovative knowledge sharing networks which contain knowledge on products, trends, and brands in the form of reviews, experience sharing, narratives, written and visual materials, OSNs enable users to connect, share, and interact with others (Inversini and Masiero, 2014; Öz, 2015; Uhrig et al., 2010). OSNs are considered as powerful platforms that allow users to collaborate and contribute to developing, extending, rating, commenting on travel related experiences (Nusair, et al., 2013) by creating user-generated content.

Tourism consumers need to collect and review different forms of travel-related information (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002) in order to reduce risk of purchasing an intangible product without having a chance of experience it in advance. Consumers benefit from different types of online information sources depending on the stage of their travel planning process (the pre-trip, during trip and post-trip stages) (Cox et al., 2009). Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) suggest that tourism consumers tend to seek information related to 10 key subdecisions regarding the trip—travel partners; the destination; expenditure required; activities; travel dates; attractions to visit; transportation providers; length of trip; rest stops; and food stops. Travelers generally collect and review travel information in the early stages of travel decision making process in order to minimize the risk of making a poor decision (Cox et al., 2009; Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002). The very intangible nature of tourism to a prospective traveler who has never been to a destination before drive travelers to look for the information supplied by other people through UGC and social networking sites on the Internet (Cox, et al., 2009; Saranow, 2004).

**IV. RESEARCH**

The online survey was conducted over a 2-month period (March and April 2016) in Turkey. Data were collected through a questionnaire prepared based on the studies of Bailey and Pearson, 1983; Cheung et al., 2009 ; Chu and Kim, 2011; Cox et al., 2009; Park et al., 2007; and Prendergast et al., 2010. A brief explanation was added to the questionnaire to make the respondents understand the concept of user-generated content (UGC) clearly, since the questionnaire was designed to determine the respondents’ usage of UGC in their travel planning process. Cronbach’s alpha was calculated to assess the reliability of the 21 items used for assessing the impact of UGC on the travel planning and trip purchase of respondents. The measure was 0.94 which suggested that the instrument was reliable (Nunnally, 1978).

The demographic profile of respondents is shown in Table 1. Among the 402 respondents, 207 respondents (51.5%) were female and 195 respondents (48.5%) were male. The majority of the respondents were aged 25-45 (68.7%).

**Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents**

Age	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
18-24	15 (7.2%)	21 (10.2%)	36 (9%)
25-35	63 (30.4%)	51 (26.2%)	114 (28.4%)
36-45	93 (44.9%)	69 (35.4%)	162 (40.3%)
46-55	30 (14.5%)	42 (21.5%)	72 (17.9%)
≥ 56	6 (2.8%)	12 (6.2%)	18 (4.4%)
TOTAL	207 (51.5%)	195 (48.5%)	402 (100.0%)

**Table 2. Usage of UGC during travel planning stages**

Travel Planning Stages	Usage of UGC during Travel Planning Stages								Total N/%
	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Travel Planning Stage 1 (Information search)	327	81.3	60	14.9	15	3.7	0	0.0	402 100.0%
Travel Planning Stage 2 (Information search)	330	82.1	57	14.2	15	3.7	0	0.0	402 100.0%
Travel Planning Stage 3 (Evaluation of alternatives)	303	75.4	81	20.1	18	4.5	0	0.0	402 100.0%
Travel Planning Stage 4 (Purchase decision)	258	64.2	120	29.9	21	5.2	3	0.7	402 100.0%
Travel Planning Stage 5 (Purchase during trip)	99	24.6	237	59.0	54	13.4	12	3.0	402 100.0%
Travel Planning Stage 6 (Post purchase evaluation)	99	24.6	231	57.5	60	14.9	12	3.0	402 100.0%
Travel Planning Stage 7 (Post purchase evaluation)	75	18.7	231	57.5	81	20.1	15	3.7	402 100.0%

Stage 1: When beginning to search for ideas on where to go (Information search)

Stage 2: When I had already chosen the destination, but was seeking information on accommodation options (Information search)

Stage 3: When trying to narrow down my choice of destinations (Evaluation of alternatives)

Stage 4: When I was looking to confirm I had made a good destination choice (Purchase decision)

Stage 5: During my actual trip when I was trying to find out about specific attractions (Purchase -during trip)

Stage 6: After my trip to allow me to share my experiences with other traveler (Post purchase evaluation)

Stage 7: After my trip to compare my experiences with those of other travelers (Post purchase evaluation)

In order to determine the travel planning stage in which UGC was mostly used by travelers, the respondents were asked the usage frequencies of any form of UGC during their travel purchases. The scale was adopted from Cox et al. (2009). Over 80% of the respondents claimed that UGC was used during information collecting stage of the travel planning process. Almost a quarter of the respondents stated that they “always” used UGC during post-purchase evaluation stage, and half of them replied that they “sometimes” used UGC during post-purchase evaluation stage. 64.2% of the respondents stated that that used UGC during purchase decision. The results are shown in Table 2.

Approximately 75% of the respondents stated that they referred to different forms of UGC while there

made their destination and accommodation choices. UGC was referred less while choices related to other travel-related products and services. The results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Usage of UGC in decision-making process of travel-related products**

Travel-Related Product	Usage of UGC during Travel-Related Product Choice Process								Total N/%
	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Destination Choice	303	75.4	84	20.9	15	3.7	0	0.0	402 100.0%
Accommodation Choice	312	77.6	75	18.7	15	3.7	0	0.0	402 100.0%
Other Travel-Related Services Choice	27	6.7	231	57.5	111	27.6	33	8.2	402 100.0%

In order to understand the impact of UGC on traveler’s decision making and decision changing related to travel plans, two questions adopted by Cox et al. (2009, p.753) were asked to the respondents:

1. How likely are you to make a final decision relating to booking a trip or travel product because of the influence of UGC?

2. How likely are you to change your existing travel plans because of the influence of UGC?

While 88.8% of respondents indicated that UGC had an influence on their final travel decision, only 6.7% of respondents replied that they were “unsure”, and 4.5% of respondents indicated that they were not affected by UGC in making their final travel decision. 63.4% of respondents replied that they would change their existing travel plans due to the influence of UGC, while 36.6% were “unsure” or “unlikely” to change their travel plans due to UGC. The results are not similar to the findings of Cox, et al. (2009); it has found that the impact of UGC on decision making and changing process of people have risen. Results are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. The influence of UGC on final decision-making**

<i>(α=0.882)</i>	The UGC Influence on Making Decision (Mean=1.8209; SD=.74255)		The UGC Influence on Changing Decision (Mean=2.4129; SD=.93884)	
	N	%	N	%
<b>Very likely</b>	135	33.6	47	11.7
<b>Likely</b>	222	55.2	208	51.7
<b>Unsure</b>	27	6.7	96	23.9
<b>Unlikely</b>	18	4.5	36	9.0
<b>Very unlikely</b>	0	0.0	15	3.7
<b>Total</b>	402	100.0	402	100.0

In order to examine factors influencing the role UGC in the respondents travel-related information search behavior, the exploratory factor analysis was applied to the survey data, and KMO and Barlett’s Test was conducted. KMO coefficient is 0.948 and the significance level of Barlett’s Test is 0.000. Items of the scale were grouped using principal component factor analysis with Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization, and 19 of the items were loaded under four factors explaining 69.386% of the total variance. The first factor containing 7 items is named as “Information-Related”. This factor explains 26.727% of the total variance. This factor consists of items reflecting the respondents’ perception of information provided by UGC. The second factor contains 6 items regarding usage of UGC in travel planning process, and is called as “UGC in Travel Planning” factor. This factor explains 19.609% of the variance. The third factor named as “UGC Travel Sources” contains 3 items about perceived trustworthiness of different sources of UGC, and explains 11.961% of total variance. The last factor containing 3 items is named as “Credibility of UGC” and it explains 11.089% of the total variance.

**Table 5. Factor analysis**

<i>(α= 0.948)</i>	F1	F2	F3	F4	Mean	SD
<b>Information-Related (α= 0.920)</b>						
The information about tourism products provided by UGC is understandable.	.825				1.4701	.64368
The information about tourism products provided by UGC is clear.	.806				1.4701	.66652
I like to apply information provided by UGC when I consider new tourism products.	.737				1.3806	.62125
I benefit from comments made by travelers on the Internet.	.706				1.6343	.75939
I always read travel-related UGC when I buy a tourism product.	.633				1.6866	.69646
The information about tourism products provided by UGC is correct.	.614				1.5597	.69746
UGC provides me necessary information about tourism products.	.604				1.5299	.69938
<b>UGC in Travel Planning (α= 0.892)</b>						

They make me confident in purchasing tourism product.		.768			1.8507	.72889
I think information provided by UGC is generally informative.		.756			1.8433	.69038
They make easier for me to make purchase decision.		.736			1.6866	.75818
I think information provided by UGC is generally useful in the travel planning process.		.622			1.5448	.66568
They enhance my effectiveness in making purchase decision.		.599			1.6418	.80587
If I have little experience with a tourism product, I refer to comments made by travelers on social network sites.		.537			1.4552	.67682
<b>UGC Travel Sources (<math>\alpha=0.712</math>)</b>						
I trust comments made by travelers on third party sites (e.g. Trip Advisor).			.757		1.9552	.59757
I trust comments made by travelers on social network sites.			.661		2.0000	.71325
I trust comments made by travelers on pure weblogs.			.597		2.3806	.77164
<b>Credibility of UGC (<math>\alpha=0.715</math>)</b>						
I think they are credible.				.732	1.7687	.76306
I think they are convincing.				.553	1.7239	.69618
I trust comments made by travelers on the Internet.				.435	1.7537	.68584
<b>Explained Variance</b>						69.386

## V. CONCLUSION

Varying sources of user-generated content provide important tools for travelers since information provided by UGC plays an important role in tourism consumers' information search and purchase decision making process. The results of the research show the place and importance of UGC as a source of information during travel planning process of tourism consumers, and how UGC is used and perceived by travelers during different stages of travel planning process and information search related to tourism products. In order to obtain a better understanding of the impact of UGC on travel decision making process (since social media has gained increasing importance in the field of marketing, it will be really helpful for marketers to understand consumers' attitudes towards and perceptions of social media), studies in this field, especially on trust level of consumers related to UGC, preferred sources of UGC, the role of consumers as producers and consumers of online information, should be conducted. This will provide an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the role of user-generated content in tourism consumers' travel planning process.

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