How do Millennial Travellers use their Mobile Devices in a City Destination? – Empirical Evidence from Switzerland

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Abstract

This paper explores how young international tourists belonging to Generation Y (Millennial travellers) use their mobile devices (i.e. smartphones and tablets) during their stay in a Swiss city destination. Data were collected using 18 qualitative narrative interviews that were transcribed and coded into concepts and themes for further analysis. The main findings are that these visitors tend to spontaneously plan their trips, and that taking pictures and sharing them on different social media platforms were the main reasons for using their mobile devices. Further, mobile device usage was related to navigation and planning of the continuing trip. The ability to have free and fast connectivity was also found to be important for the respondents. These and other results have several implications for destination management organizations (DMOs), tourism service providers, and their ability to enhance physical on-site experiences through virtual co-creation.

Key Words: mobile tourism; mobile device usage; Generation Y; social media; connectivity.

1 Introduction

Several researchers have established a long-standing relationship between mobile technology and the tourism industry (e.g. Brown & Chalmers, 2003). Mobile devices have become a powerful tool for tourists (Kenteris, Gavalas, & Economou, 2009); and therefore, an inevitable partner for tourism, whose context has become a fertile ground for mobile computing (Cheverst, Davies, Mitchell, Friday, & Efstratiou, 2000). However, research related to how mobile devices (i.e. smartphones, tablets) are used by international tourists while experiencing a destination is still in its infancy (Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2012; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2013; Dewan & Benckendorff, 2013). Most research to date has focused on developing mobile tour guides and studying their behavioural impacts (e.g. Kramer, Modsching, Hagen, & Gretzel, 2007; Alshattnawi, 2013), the acceptance of mobile tourism applications and services (Bader, Baldauf, Leinert, Fleck, & Liebrich, 2012; Kwon, Bae, & Blum, 2013), benchmarking the use of mobile applications and services by destinations (Buhalis & Wagner, 2013; Grèzes, Crettol, Sarrasin, Zumstein, & Perruchoud, 2013), and evaluating functionalities of mobile applications in the tourism travel domain (Dickinson et al., 2014). So while research on the supply side of mobile tourism applications and services is constantly growing, too little attention has been paid to the demand side. Consequently, this paper investigates how young international tourists belonging to Generation Y (Millennial travellers) use their mobile devices while visiting a city destination, based on the example of Lucerne in Switzerland.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Mobile Device Usage in the On-site Travel Phase

The use of media, technology, and the Internet, through mobile devices, can support and enhance tourists' experience at all stages (i.e. pre-travel, on-site, and post-travel) (Prayag, Dimanche, & Keup, 2012). Neuhofer, Buhalis, and Ladkin (2012) consider "the on-site phase […] as the most intriguing phase for DMOs, with multiple levels of engagement that allow destinations to co-create experiences with the tourist in the physical and virtual setting at the same time" (p. 42). Most literature on the use of mobile devices by tourists indicates that smartphones and tablets are mainly used for travel information purposes while in a destination (McCabe, 2011; Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2012). The most important use of mobile devices in a destination is for keeping in touch with friends and family (Merr, 2012). More specifically, the most frequent reason why Generation Y tourists use their mobile devices is to check social media (Dewan & Benckendorff, 2013). Further uses of mobile devices by tourists were found to be checking e-mails (Postel, 2013) and accessing a wide range of information services (Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2010). Such usage of mobile devices while being on site may make travel activities more spontaneous and transform how tourists make decisions (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2013).

2.2 Generation Y Mobile Users

Generation Y often appears in the literature "as Generation Next, Millennials or the Net Generation, [and] usually refers to people born between 1982 and 2002" (Muskat, Muskat, Zehrer, & Johns, 2013, p. 57), from different ethnical backgrounds (Hicks & Hicks, 1999). Davidson (2008) suggests that Generation Y users are more at ease with new technologies and broadcast an intrinsic interest and understanding for the use of new technologies. This paper focuses on Generation Y international tourists because they have been identified as the cohort that uses mobile technologies the most (Schewe & Meredith, 2006; Moore, 2012; Dewan & Benckendorff, 2013) and acknowledged to feel the need to be highly connected online and mobile (Zhang, Adipat, & Mowafi, 2009).

2.3 City Destinations as Prime Places for Virtual Co-Creation

City destinations provide fertile ground for a plethora of mobile tourism applications and services because they typically feature (a) a high density of attractions and other points of interests, (b) good coverage with mobile broadband (e.g. 3G and 4G/LTE), and (c) many Wi-Fi hotspots at (semi-)public places. When city destinations adopt and implement the Smart City concept, they can evolve to Smart Tourism Destinations that pursue the co-creation of rich tourism experiences by leveraging different types of ICT (e.g. Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013). Given the high potential for virtual co-creation of experience and thereby enhancing tourists' physical experiences on site (Neuhofer et al., 2012), a deeper understanding of how international tourists use their mobile devices is clearly needed. Extant research on mobile tourism in Switzerland has either analysed the acceptance of mobile tourism services by domestic tourists (Bader et al., 2012) or benchmarked mobile tourism applications and services provided by destinations (e.g. Grèzes et al., 2013). None has yet addressed international tourists' use of mobile devices on site.

3 Methodology

To identify and analyse how young international tourists use their mobile devices, 18 narrative interviews were conducted at two mid-tier hotels in the city of Lucerne. This qualitative approach was chosen because the aim was to explore how mobile devices were used. Additionally, Bryman and Bell (2007) argue that a qualitative approach is suitable when the research is interested in the point of view of the participants. According to the cohort typology of Hicks and Hicks (1999), Generation Y international tourists were defined as individuals from different ethnical backgrounds whose birth years range from the early 1980s to the early 2000s. Lucerne, chosen as an exemplary Swiss city destination, is characterized by (a) a variety of attractions, support services, and tourist resources ideal for a one-day tourism experience (Fabricius, M., Carter, R., & Standford, D., 2007), (b) almost complete mobile broadband coverage, and (c) free public Wi-Fi hotspots in the old town, the main station, and in many semi-public places. Simple random sampling was employed to choose the respondents with a pre-tested interview guide composed of open-ended questions. With regards to data analysis, thematic coding assisted into turning the data (i.e. transcriptions) into meaningful information.

4 Findings and Discussion

The main goal of this paper was to identify how young international tourists use their mobile devices in the on-site travel phase in a city destination. The two most frequent concepts were 'taking pictures' and 'connecting to social media'. Very often, both concepts had been mentioned in direct relation to each other: The respondents expressed their desire to keep in touch with their close social environment by sharing their travel experiences and posting images via mobile devices on social media platforms. This confirms findings of Merr (2012) and Dewan and Benckendorff (2013). The desire to constantly interact with home becomes even more evident, as the findings show that many of the respondents also check the local news from back home by using domestic newspaper applications. Thus, a spillover effect from practices in daily routines into the travel context can be identified. While being physically away from their home worlds, the respondents stay electronically linked to them. This blurring of everyday life and vacation time can also be described as "digital elasticity" (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012) and leads to a "decapsulation" of the travel experience (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2013). However, the findings also suggest that for certain phases, the respondents consciously decide for an "encapsulated" travel experience (Jansson, 2007), as expressed by one interviewee: "To me, I used the iPad on the first day here to take pictures, but after, I did not even bring my phone or iPad when I went to the old town". Navigation software was used by the majority of respondents, but only sporadically for way-finding. The interviewees do apparently not use mobile applications and services provided by local tourism organisations. Instead, they use mobile apps and services they already know from home (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp, Google Maps). This substantiates findings of previous work suggesting young travellers do rarely download and use travel apps (Dewan & Benckendorff, 2013) or mobile apps from hospitality firms (Kwon et al., 2013). The results further suggest that the interviewees value fast and affordable connectivity and thus primarily go online via free Wi-Fi provided by their accommodation. As a result,

most online interactions such as sharing of experiences and photos via social media do not happen in real time, but rather in a post-hoc manner. This corroborates findings of Dewan and Benckendorff (2013) who suggest that availability and cost of network access constrain international mobile information search behaviour.

5 Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research

This paper contributes to the yet small, but growing body of knowledge about how tourists use their mobile devices in the on-site travel phase. It revealed that Generation Y international tourists use their mobile devices for a variety of purposes when being in a destination, first and foremost to take photos and use social media. This hints at one way how tourists' physical on-site experience can be enhanced through virtual co-creation of tourism stakeholders, namely by augmenting the reality seen through the mobile device screen with context-based and thus relevant information. However, as a lucrative niche as this could be, it comes with certain limitations as destination-based apps seem unable to gain shares from the global players in the mobile market and both context-based services and Augmented Reality applications rely on fast and seamless connectivity. The heavy social media usage by Generation Y tourists via their mobile devices invites DMOs and tourism service providers to specifically target these travellers with relevant information and advertisements on social media platforms while they are in the destination. Generation Y's differentiated willingness to use their mobile devices on site calls for a quantitative study to segment Generation Y tourists accordingly. Future research should also explore in more detail how tourism organisations can leverage the phenomenon of "digital elasticity" to improve the experience of the mobile tourist.

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