# A REVIEW ON THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN TRAVEL DECISION OF YOUTH TRAVELERS

Tan Lay Yen[1*], Norhazliza Abd Halim[2]

[1]  Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Faculty of Built Environment and Surveying, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia
    Email: alicely5438@gmail.com
[2]  Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Faculty of Built Environment and Surveying, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia
    Email: norhaz@utm.my
[*]  Corresponding Author

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**Abstract:**

This paper will highlight the review of previously reported data by numerous authors. Nowadays, widespread social media is used more and more especially in tourism. Recent trends in technology have observed the emergence of social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. These websites encourage users to share information on what they are doing, upload pictures of what they have been up to, and post blog entries in order to share their interests and activities with other users. From the industry perspective, more and more hotels or tourist destinations are using these social networking sites as communication tools with their guests. It is evident that people are depending on their peers' reviews through these social networking sites before purchasing products and services. As a result, social networking sites are growing both in popularity and importance for consumers as well as corporate. Previous research regarding the use of social media among youth travellers has mainly focused on its impact on travellers' travel planning process and there is consensus that travel decisions are highly influenced by social media. Considering that an answer to the research question of "will social media influence the travel decision of the youth travellers", the aim of this study is to fill this research gap and to examine the influence of social media on youth travellers' decision making. A proposed conceptual framework is developed in order to understand the influence of social media on travel decision making among youth travellers. The findings of this study are important to tourism online marketers in order to have a better understanding on youth travellers in the use of social media so that they can adapt online marketing strategies for this segment.

**Introduction**

The rise of web 2.0 technologies has contributed to the importance of social media in day-to-day life (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Social media has rapidly risen in popularity in the 21st century as one of the new marketing platforms which allow users to connect with one another. It is important to note that the communications in the virtual world are very rapid and news spreads faster than in any other form of communication over the internet. Social media have emerged as a powerful information and communication channel and have significantly changed the practice of marketing communication for many companies, including those in the tourism and hospitality industry (Song and Yoo, 2016).

As social media have developed into one of the most important sources of information, it is suggested that academia investigates their effects as they relate to tourism (Cohen et al., 2014; Leung et al., 2013).Therefore, it is no longer necessary for the individuals to wait to interact physically in order to understand the actual situation of a destination that they wish to travel to. It is now possible to go through these social networking sites in order to get e-word of mouth as references. It is also possible to access the visual impact of the destination on the social networking sites. That is why taking a decision become easier and it also supports the decision-making process as which it is the best offer for travelling to a particular destination (Mintel, 2013).

Travel discussion websites (such as TripAdvisor, Trivago) are gaining popularity in terms of number of users and postings per user. From the industry perspective, the trend is the same, which means that more and more hotels or tourist destination are using these types of websites as one of the communication tools with their guests. It is evident that people are depending on their peers' reviews before purchasing tourism products and services. As a result, social networking sites are growing both in popularity and importance for the consumers as well as corporate. They are not only a platform for friends to stay connected but also these websites have advanced to a critical part of marketing.

From the aspect of tourism, traveller's decision making has been viewed as an important research topic both in academia and tourism industry. In contemporary marketing activities, tourists' decision making has become a crucial part in the determination of tourist destination (Wang, Lu, and Xia, 2012). In order to develop the tourism industry, it is important for tourism organisations and operators to understand the traveller's decision making as it may assist in product development, improving marketing strategies, enhancing service delivery approaches and the creation of a competitive advantage.

The influence of social media on travel decision-making has attracted much attention from tourism scholars. A recent literature analysis has suggested that most of such studies have focused on the impact of social media on behavioural intention with very limited studies on actual behaviour (Leung et al., 2019). Research by Cox et al. (2009) pioneered the topic on the roles of social media. Their research took a deductive approach using an online survey that explored only the roles of social media outlined in the existing literature without offering much

enlightenment on new roles or an extended discussion of the existing ones. Although these studies have highlighted the importance of social media in tourists' decision-making as well as in tourism management and marketing, research focussing on the different generations played by social media has been limited.

## Background of Study

For those who were born between 1980 and 2000 (also known as the Generation Y or the Millennials or youth), the usage and integration of the Internet technology and social media with their daily life activities are not a challenge as they have a natural boundary and understanding of how these technologies can affect and simplify their daily life, because they grew up with them. It is said that nowadays approximately 70% of youth regard shared online information or opinions from their friends as influential in their purchasing decision (eMarketer, 2014) and they do consider travel review websites with a high number of personal experience statements as influential on their travel plans (eMarketer, 2012). This is also reflected in the travel decision making process by youth and social media no longer stand for cultivating friendships only, but are also considered as an important information source to help them decide where to go, how to get there and at which particular accommodation they should stay.

From the consumers' perspectives, social media has an impact on their decisions just as it influences destination management organizations on the suppliers' side (Bilgihan et al, 2016; Tanford and Montgomery, 2015). Hudson et al. (2015) confirmed that social media interactions among tourists has a significant effect on customer relationships with tourism brands. Additionally, Cabiddu et al. (2014) analysed that combined social media metrics (e.g., the number of Facebook fans, the average responses per post, the average likes per post, and even the number of Twitter followers.) within the tourism context supports customer engagement. This clearly indicates that using social media has the potential to positively influence tourists' decision making.

In the tourism industry, many changes occurred in the last few decades. While Generation X used the services of travel agencies or tour operators, youth are more critical and tend to compare prices, check reviews and useful information online at social media sites and form an opinion about different offers. It is therefore expected that social media have a substantial influence on youth travellers' decision to purchase a product.

In the tourism and hospitality literature, a number of studies already discussed how Internet technology influences travellers. For instance, Gretzel and Fesenmaier's (2009) study discusses how different technologies (e.g., online customer support, e-mail and online travel communities) are used throughout the three stages of tourism consumption process. Although substantial effort has been made on examining how Internet technology impact travellers, there is still a knowledge gap regarding the influence of social media on their decision to travel by travellers in general and youth travellers in particular.

Despite increasing attention towards Facebook, research into this social medium has mainly been devoted to aspects such as privacy and psychological traits (Hew, K. F.,2011;Stutzman, F, Capra, R., Thompson, J.,2011) In fact, only a limited number of current studies have focused on young travellers' behaviours (Pantano, E., Taversine, A. and Viassone, M.,2010). Since young people are more likely to use Facebook and social networks for news-related purposes

compared with older people (Zillinger, M. 2008) and given their increasing likelihood of buying travel products (especially due to the high availability of low-cost flight connections and accommodation for youth).

This study focuses on the usage of social media by youth travellers and its influence on their travel decision. This group has achieved large exposure in current literature due to its attitude towards travelling and adopting new technologies. In fact, the emergence of organizations devoted to supporting young tourists in travelling and planning vacations (eg World Youth Student & Educational Travel Confederation, Federation of International Youth Travel Organisations, etc) highlights the increasing power of youth in the tourism sector and the need for new strategies to support the global industry in reaching this particular target audience.

Considering that an answer to the research question of "will social media influence the travel decision of the youth travellers", the aim of this study is to fill this research gap and to examine the influence of social media on youth travellers' decision making. Due to the fact that not many research studies have yet been provided on the topic of how social media influences youth travel decision in Malaysia whether to travel or not, but this study is exploratory in nature and a literature review research approach would be employed. This research is aimed to examine how social media will influence youth travellers' travel decision. In order to achieve this aim, this study focuses on youth travellers as they are active user in social media.

## Literature Review

### Social Media

Social media is a group of internet-based applications which build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0. It allows the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Parr (2010) defines social media as the use of electronic and Internet tools for the purpose of sharing and discussing information and experiences with other human beings in a more efficient ways. Jantsch (2008) considers social media as the use of technology combined with social interaction to create or co-create value. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, social media is the forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content.

Dykeman (2008) regards social media defined as "the means for any person to: publish digital, creative content; provide and obtain real-time feedback via online discussions, commentary and evaluations; and incorporate changes or corrections to the original content" (Dykeman, 2008).The online encyclopaedia wiki defines social media as the media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues.

From all these kinds of definitions, it is not hard to identify three fundamental elements that support the existence and prosperity of social media that is content, communities and Web 2.0. Without the technology, social media is just an empty talk. The Web 2.0 technology enables people to use various platforms to share, discuss and create contents with each other in the community. Nevertheless, technology becomes meaningless by itself unless people employ it to create value. From this point of view, communities, content and Web 2.0 are complementary and necessary to each other.

## Role of Social Media

In Spello's (2013) study, social media has become popular in our personal lives but also our professional lives. It's either way to keep in touch with friends and family or a place to share your life, with picture or videos. Spello (2013) also pointed out that social media is more than a social service, a place where staff, colleagues and customer share critical information that can be helpful to them. Social media is an important tool for people today. Majority of people get most of the news through social media and even job opportunities.

One of the biggest platforms they will likely emphasize is typically Facebook and Twitter. It's obvious that Facebook play a big role in most of our lives. There are more than 1 million people who has Facebook, half of them log into Facebook every day and spends more than 20 minutes a day on it. Facebook is where many people go for information and news. Another platform, Twitter where they able to follow celebrities but also for critical news from their followers. For many people and organization, including the traditional media, Twitter was a tool for "up-to-date" during the Boston Marathon bombing. Reporters would use the twitter feed to report the breaking news and looking at their phone to check the news from other reporters. Twitter may not have as much of users as Facebook but enough to be one of the most popular platforms (Spello, 2013).

A study from Ipsos Open Thinking Exchange by Wiltfong (2013), which reports that Americans in the age range 18-34, spend on average 3.8 hours a day on social networking from a mobile phone, computer and/or tablet. But 20 percent of these users aged 18-34 claims to spend 6 hours or more per day social networking. When taking a look at other countries like Turkey, Argentina, Russia and Indonesia, these countries respectively spend on average 4.9, 4.7, 4.6 and 6 hours on social media.

## Social Media and Tourism

Due to this massive usage of social media platforms, such as sharing and commenting on content, the power of consumers gained more weight remarkably over time. Travellers do have the possibility to "search, organize, share, and annotate their travel stories and experiences" (Leung et al., 2013) through a large number of different types of social media sites, which a formidable number of people make us of during their trip planning process (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, Buultjens, 2009). Hence, more and more customers consider electronic word-of-mouth as a reliable source of information, specifically for products that can be searched for, booked and purchased online (Sparks & Browning, 2011).

Since social media spread messages easily and they get adopted by the Millennials, one can say that it is inevitable for the tourism and hospitality industry to pay attention to any new technological inventions that occur. However, Leung et al. (2013) discovered in their study that the vast majority of their studied hotels still did not make use of social media to its full extent. This is why particularly review sites need to be carefully considered and dealt with in marketing strategies that offer intangible and inseparable products (Papathanassis & Knolle, 2009). These include for instance accommodation facilities which cannot be tested or experienced until the arrival at the destination and checking in.

By communicating to consumers that their opinions and ideas are highly appreciated and valued, the likelihood of feedback is feasible to increase remarkably. Furthermore, Parra-Lopez

et al. (2011) illustrate in their study that "community managers should recognize and be thankful for the tourists' participation in terms of contribution (photos, videos, comments, etc.) about their products". By sharing their personal media online, they give prospective customers the opportunity to see the offers provided by the touristic firm from a different perspective. Thus, they might even consider this information more trustworthy than the one provided by the company, which can result in both positive and negative influences for the respective firm.

However, the question of why people use electronic devices to share their personal tourism experiences with others online arises. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) aimed to reveal the answers in their study through the application of a quantitative research approach and the distinction between several media types. Forty percent of the respondents in their study agreed that they share their information on social media sites due to their willingness to help others and prevent them from making bad product choices. Furthermore, it is illustrated in their study that nearly 60% of the respondents who travelled to Mallorca wrote blogs or posted their experiences on Facebook in order to keep in touch with their friends and acquaintances. Concerning the reason for sharing online media, like photos and videos, it is indicated that these tourists "were led by self-centred motivations such as wanting to contribute to websites that were useful to them, liking to share their impressions through the Internet, and being more recognised for their experiences" (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

Maslow (1954) offered a hierarchy theory of needs to explain an individual's behaviour. He identified the five levels of needs: physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow contends that people try to satisfy their needs starting with the lowest level and moving to the highest. Once a lower level of need (e.g., physiological) is satisfied, the individual moves up to the next level, thus working up the hierarchy until each level of need is satisfied.

Furthermore, travel decision making is a process that involves several stages. Motivation to travel is the starting point in the travel decision-making process, followed by information collection, and assessment and elimination of destination alternatives. Once travellers have this information, they choose a destination, and participate in the actual travel. Finally, after travel is completed, travellers evaluate their satisfaction with the destination choice, and this evaluation will then influence future motivation for travel (Mansfeld, 1992).

### *Travel Decision Making*

Finding information for travelling purposes is an important part of making travel plans and it is one of the first steps of the decision-making process in order to reduce the risk of using unfamiliar services or of travelling to unfamiliar destinations (Nusair et al., 2013). Travelling can be divided into three phases: the before visiting phase, the during visiting phase, and the after visiting phase (Lim, 2012). During all these phases, travellers seek, use, and share information using different sources.

Becoming a traveller is a self-learned process. According to MacCannell (1999), "touristic information is found in guidebooks and travel writings, but it is more thoroughly diffused throughout the modern world than in the case for some other types of information". In the westernized world, with the development of Internet and social media, we have a real time access to the same information around the world. Generation Y members are able to follow the same trends, music, fashion, news, etc. around the clock and 365 days a year. This goes also for travelling and for seeking travel information.

The travel industry is advertising tourism with attractive images and messages 20 through mass media. According to Suvantola (2002, p. 98), travel has become a commodity "and our dreams are the material that the travel industry utilizes in advertising it". An image of a destination has an effect on one's travel decision-making process. Selby (2004, p. 66) noted that the image, according to psychologists, is a "distinct way of processing and storing multi-sensory information in working memory". Gunn (1972) has explained the destination image building process is done through three sources: non-commercial sources, commercial sources, and first-hand experience (in Selby, 2004, p. 69). Non-commercial information sources are friends, family, literature, media, and education, while commercial information sources are operators in tourism industry like tourist boards, destination management companies, travel agencies, and other sources that produce advertisement and destination marketing.

Meanwhile, Giletson and Crompton (1983) argue that friends and family have more influence when making travel decisions than commercial sources (in Selby, 2004). According to Pendergast (2010), as Generation Y members are network oriented and interactive, their peers and friends have a great influence on their decision-making process and their opinions are highly valued by other Generation Y members. Besides, Suvantola (2002) also noted that the most influential factor behind our travel choices is the positive stories we hear from other people who have been and experienced a particular destination or place. Finally, the first-hand experience modifies a visitor's image and changes the perception created by non-commercial and commercial information, even after returning home and when reflecting on the visit afterwards (Selby 2004).

### *The Theory of Planned Behaviour*
The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is an extension of TRA, developed due to critics dealing with explaining behaviours for which an individual has incomplete volitional control (Ajzen, 1991). Hence, compared to TRA, TPB includes one more factor, which is Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC) and is a determinant of both intentions to use and actual usage behaviour. TPB states that the higher the degree of perceived behavioural control, the higher intention to use. The higher intention to use then leads to a higher degree of usage behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Moreover, in predicting the usage behaviour there is a weak correlation between attitude and usage behaviour. However, measures of intention have a close and relationship with behaviour. The theory of planned behaviour is built on this evidence (Ajzen, 1985). The TPB theory states that intentions generate the actual behaviour, while attitudes, subjective norms and PCB affect these intentions.
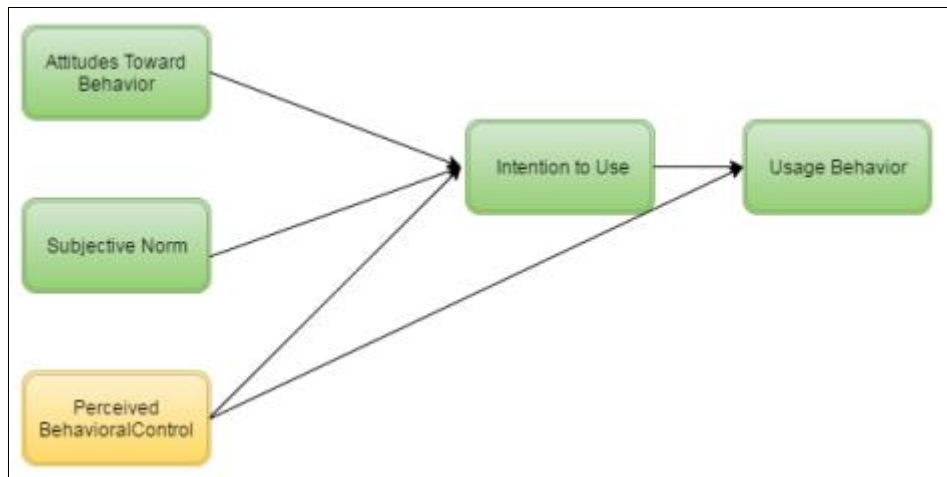
**Figure 1: Theory of Planned Behaviour**

Source: Ajzen, 1991

According to this theory, behavioural intention can be affected by three factors: attitude towards performing a particular behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen,1985, 1991). Attitude denotes a positive or negative inclination towards conducting a particular behaviour, such as visiting a vacation destination (Lam & Hsu, 2006; Moutinho, 1987). Subjective norms refer to an individual's perceived social pressure to engage or not in a behaviour, and the inclination to conform to this social pressure (Moutinho, 1987). Perceived behavioural control refers to peoples' perceptions of their capacity to perform a particular behaviour, such as visiting a vacation destination (Lam & Hsu, 2006).

**Methodology**
This study was based on a review of literature from a range of peer reviewed papers on social media and travellers' decision making, and social media. A literature review on social media and the travel decision-making was conducted. A number of sources were referenced, and these include Science Direct, Google Scholar, Emerald Insights Journals, Institutional Repository, Scopus, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, Sabinet, and ProQuest.

These sources were used as part of a data collection procedure and were examined for information related to social media and the travel decision-making process. Thus, the objectives of the study were achieved through an understanding of literature.

**Literature Findings**
Gretzel et al. (2007) determined how online travel reviews on TripAdvisor can influence consumer travel decision making. Their study found that opinions posted on online travel review sites by the other travellers were most sources of information frequently used by travellers (Gretzel et al., 2007). It was also found from their study that travellers continuously check accommodation reviews in order to decide on the type accommodation to use in the whole travelling process.

Forties et al., (2012) also examined the use of social media during trip planning and discovered that the information search and post trip phase are the most phases where social media sites are predominantly used and this notion was also supported by Rathonyi (2013).

Shyle and Hysi's (2015) study on social media impact on trip decision making, reported that 91% of the respondents included in their study turn to social media sites when searching for information about hotel, tickets and tourist packages when planning a trip and most of the people specified that information posted on social media sites is dependable. Conversations between friends on social media sites were found to the most reliable source of credible information according to their study.

The review of literature also shows that although TripAdvisor and Facebook are the predominantly used social media sites by travellers, Instagram has now emerged as new social media site being used by millennials to search for travel information and to share their experiences using hashtags to attract others (Tong, 2018). Tong's study revealed that the majority of Hong Kong travellers use Instagram on the dream stage by following travel related comments and on the planning stage to seek for information on attractions and leisure activities. Also, Tong's study revealed that Instagram is used to share live experience as well as to stay connected with friends. Moreover, travellers also use this social media site to share their travel experiences after their trips.

A proposed conceptual framework is developed in order to understand the influence of social media on travel decision making among youth travellers. The figure below shows the proposed conceptual framework for this study.
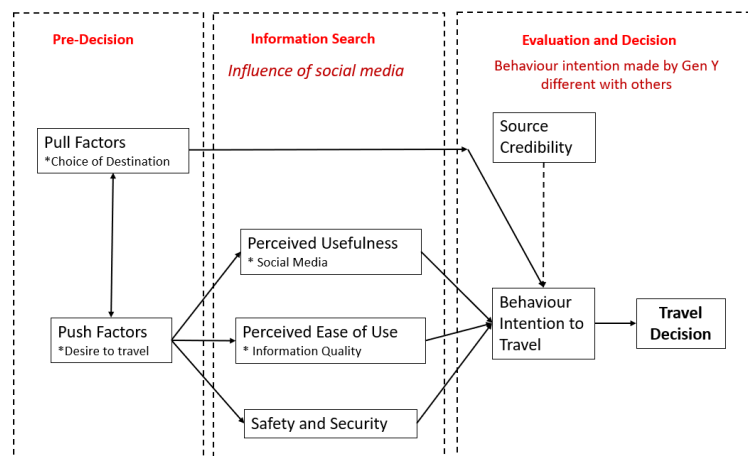


**Figure 2: Conceptual Frame**

**Conclusion**
From the previous reported data by numerous authors, it can say that social media sites play an important role in tourism. From pre-decision to information search, the whole trip planning process and destination decision making, social media play an important role. Traveller's decision making has been viewed as an important research topic both in academia and tourism industry. The literature review shows that social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram are the most used sites by travellers during trip planning and destination choices. The proposed framework contributes to the study on youth travellers' decision making to travel. Comprehension of the decision making to travel among youth in relation of social media can help marketers to predict customer needs and market trends for this segmentation to provide better service with the use of social media.

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