VNU Journal of Science: Economics and Business, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2014) 65-74

Factors Affecting Travel Decision Making: A Study of the Credibility of Online Travel-related Information in Vietnam

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Received 2 April 2014
Revised 28 June 2014; Accepted 11 July 2014

Abstract: This study investigates the factors influencing consumer perception of credibility of online travel-related information on online communities, especially online social networks and, in turn the degree to which the perception of online information credibility affects trust and travel decision-making. Online and offline surveys of Vietnamese consumers were conducted with a total of 328 individuals responding to questionnaires regarding the determinants of consumer perceptions, online trust and the use of online information for travel decisions. The findings show that online social network (Facebook) use is widespread in travel information exchanges and the degree of perception of online information credibility by the consumer has a positive effect on trust, as well as on the travel decision of the consumer.

Keywords: Online information credibility, travel decision, online communities, social network.

1. Introduction

Tourism is an information intensive industry [1]. Therefore, travelers usually pay much attention to the activity of information searching to satisfy their information needs [2]. Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) listed nine key concerns regarding travel planning, namely: travel partners, destination, trip budget, activities, travel dates, places visited, transportation providers, trip length and food [3]. Fesenmaier and Jeng (2000) found that travelers generally search for online travel-related information in the pre-travel stage in order to minimize the risks of making an unfavorable travel decision [4]. Web 2.0 sites such as blogs, social network sites and review sites have been emerging as the central hub for travelers to search for online travel-related information for their trip plan [5]. With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, travelers today can actively collaborate with peers in creating, using and diffusing travel information through the Internet, what is called travel-related consumer-generated media (CGM). CGM becomes an important online information source for travelers in the context of travel decision-making [5, 6 & 7]. In America, CGM is especially important since trip planners often rely on others' experiences for their travel decision-making. Indeed, a study reported that more than 80 percent of travel product purchasers were influenced by various types of travel-related CGM including videos, reviews, blogs, social networking media comments or

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other online forms of feedback in the context of a travel purchase intention [8]. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, travel information search related to CGM use is not the most popular online activity.

According to a study of Vina Research in 2013, more than 70 percent of surveyed travelers answer that they gather travel information from friends, family members and travel agencies while only about 14.4 percent look up information from online tourism communities and social network sites [9]. However, the 89.2 percent of travelers who are younger than 30 years old percent said that they are interested in online sharing activities such as posting photographs, video and commenting on tourism services in the post-travel stage [9]. Therefore, it is predicted that travel-related CGM will be preferred and become an influential source for travel decision making in the near future.

Even so, there are increasing numbers of online travelers who use GCM, especially Facebook or backpacker forums for sharing, discussing and exchanging their trip experiences, CGM is often perceived as less trustworthy than traditional tourism information channels. The studies of Smith, Menon & Sivakumar (2005) and Jin, Bloch & Cameron (2002) indicated that the information credibility issue is mostly concerned in travel-related CGM due to information source anonymity [10, 11]. In addition, the credibility is also influenced by the quality of the information and the expertise of source providers. Online information credibility is defined as the degree to which online consumers evaluate online information or posted messages on CGM to be trustworthy [12, 13]. Evaluating the credibility of a CGM source is more difficult than evaluating information from traditional channels due to the weak quality control mechanism of the third party in the online environment [14]. Johnson & Kaye (2008) indicated that consumers or Internet users are usually free to upload information without any confirmation process to ensure the quality of information [15]. Therefore, the absence of any filtering mechanism may result in inaccurate or false information being released in the Web-based media. In addition, CGM or other Internet sources offer interactive characteristics with which consumers may replicate, duplicate, manipulate and disseminate information easily [16]. As a result, inaccurate information may be reproduced by recipients with extraordinary simplicity. Therefore, the uncertainty about the credibility of online information is a key point, which will be investigated further in this research.

Most research on the subject has examined the credibility of online travel community or travel-related CGM in developed countries, especially in America. In Vietnam, this topic is quite new and has not been studied so far. Therefore, this study will focus on investigating the factors that drive online credibility in travel-related CGM on online social network sites and domestic tourism forums. In addition, my study also examines the influence of credibility perception on the traveler's trust in shared travel information and in making travel decisions based on such information.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

2.1. Influences of perceived information credibility (PIC) on trust (T) and travel decision making (TDM)

The Adapting Trust concept of Moorman (1993). In this study, trust is defined as the positive expectation of tourism products or services, without having prior experience of those two aspects, after a consumer's awareness is exposed to product information, which is likely to be perceived as credible [17]. A consumer's preferences and decisions about tourism services depend on the perception of travel-related information credibility. Therefore, when information is perceived as

credible, trust in the product will be formed, and then the travel service or product purchase intention will also be developed [18, 19]. In other words, information credibility perception is a central element in the decision-making process through its effect on a consumer's degree of trust and behavioral intentions. Hence, hypotheses are developed as follows:

H1: Perceiving Information Credibility positively affects Trust

H2: Perceiving Information Credibility positively affects Travel Decision Making

H3: Trust positively affects Travel Decision Making

2.2. Uncertainty reduction theory

The Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) is used as the key theory in this study. The URT was originally developed to explain the dynamics of human communication [20]. The Uncertainty concept in communication is defined as an individual's inability to predict other people's behavior [21]. The important assumption of URT is that an increase of behavior predicting ability in human interaction is the primary key in reducing uncertainty in communication, as well as enhancing the degree of information credibility in communication [20]. Therefore, a high level of uncertainty in initial interactions motivates parties to engage in information-seeking activities, such as behavior observation and conversation participation, by which the level of liking, intimacy and similarity among them may be developed [22, 23 & 24]. The Internet-mediated communication (forum, social networking discussion or online instant messaging) refers to the facilitation of sophisticated interactions among individuals, both synchronous and asynchronous by virtue of IT devices [25]. Compared to face-to-face communication, the participants in online communication are limited in observing and evaluating the attitudes or behavior of partners [26]. This problem is aggravated by anonymity. Therefore, in this study, we focused on finding out how to reduce uncertainty in information sources. In other words, we emphasize what the factors that enhance the degree of information credibility in CGM are.

2.3. Factors affecting perceived information credibility and trust in CGM

Park and Floyd (1996) argued that raising the ability of predicting source identity (SI), understanding personality (especially openness) (O); perceiving similarity (S) and Internet expertise (IE) of the online communication partners will significantly enhance the online credibility perception of consumers [27].

a. Internet expertise (IE)

The Internet expertise of online consumers refers to familiarity with websites, online skills and online entertainment experiences in Internet usage [12]. Some studies, including those of Austin & Dong (1994), and Johnson & Kaye (2010) suggest that online credibility perception is influenced by Internet expertise [28, 29]. It is found that the more people use the Internet, the more they will judge that online information is credible. In addition, Greer (2003) also claim that the amount of time spent on Internet use is the strongest predictor of whether the online media would be considered as credible [30]. Drawing upon findings from previous research, this study suggests that individuals with a high level of Internet experience are likely to perceive greater credibility on CGM information and to have a higher degree of trust than individuals with less experience. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Perceiving Information Credibility is positively affected by Internet experience

H5: Trust is positively affected by Internet Experience

b. Openness (O)

In tourism research, personality has often been used as a basis for market segmentation purposes. A number of tourism studies suggest

that personality is related to travel destination choices, leisure activities and other travel-related decisions [31, 32 & 33]. Another study of Turten and Bosnjak (2001) found that openness, a factor of personality, described by adjectives like imaginative, curious, broad-minded and intelligent, is positively related to the degree of perceiving and trusting online entertainment and travel information [34]. Therefore, this study suggests that individuals with a high level of openness perceive greater credibility and trust of CGM information than individuals with a low level of openness. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Perceiving Information Credibility is positively influenced by Openness

H7: Trust is positively influenced by Openness

c. Source identity (SI)

Ma and Agarwal (2007) defined Source identity: "Source identity in online communication refers to the extent to which CGM information discloses the basic personal information about the identity or personal details of the individuals who posted the reviews" [35].

The findings of the study of Sussan and Seigal (2003) indicated that information acquisition is more efficient when the source is identifiable, and an identifiable source enhances the information trustworthiness, and so the identified sources are likely to be deemed credible and useful [36].

H8: Source Identity positively affects Perceiving Information Credibility

H9: Source Identity positively affects Trust

d. Similarity (S)

In the online environment, perceived similarity refers to the extent to which a consumer feels similar to the sender who posts online a review or comments on CGM in terms of attitudes, preferences, emotions, and behaviors [10]. Online consumers with similar social, demographic and psychographic characteristics tend to have similar needs and wants in consumption [37]. For this reason, consumers are likely to feel comfortable when interacting with other consumers who have similar personal characteristics [38]. In addition, Similarity of individuals leads to a greater level of interpersonal attraction and trust than would be expected among dissimilar individuals. Therefore, two hypotheses are developed as follows:

H10: Similarity positively affects Perceiving Information Credibility

H11: Similarity positively affects Trust

3. Research methodology

3.1. Data collection and sampling

Our study targets members of Facebook, Twitter and online domestic travel communities[1]. We distributed 500 questionnaires to students, professional staff, business owners and others, and also conducted an online survey by posting messages about questionnaires on Facebook, Twitter and online travel communities from the beginning of February, 2014 to the middle of March, 2014. Eventually, 328 responses were collected, of which 47.6 percent and 52.4 percent were males and females, respectively. With regard to occupational level, the largest number of respondents were professional staff comprising 71 percent of the survey sample, while the second largest number were student accounting for only 16.5 percent. Demographic information also indicated that 16.8 percent of the respondents were between 19 and 22 years old, 30.8 percent between 23 and 30 years old, 30.8 percent between 30 and 35 years old, and 16.2 percent were older than 35. Therefore, the major participants in our survey were younger than 35 years old (83.8 percent). In addition, of

[1] www.dulichbui.vn, www.dulichcongdong.com and www.phuot.vn

the sample, 100 percent answered that they use Facebook as an online communication channel to exchange and search travel-related information, 13.7 percent use both Facebook and an online tourism community to look up tourism information, while only 9.1 percent use all three online communities (Facebook, Twitter and an online tourism community).

3.2. Measurement development

Firstly, we developed questionnaire items to measure each of the constructs in the research model, adapted from prior literature, and each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1: Strongly disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neutral, 4: Agree, and 5: Strongly agree. The scale for Travel Decision-Making, based on the purchase intention concept, was adapted from Dodds et al., (1991) [39]. The Online Trust scale used in this study was developed by Bart et al., (2005) to measure Trust determinants, and the scale for perceiving the credibility of online information measured by accuracy, believability, lack of bias and completeness factor, was adapted from Flanagin & Metzger (2000) which was originally developed by West (1994) [5,16 & 40]. In addition, Flanagin and Metzeger (2000) use four indicators, namely: Internet use, experience, expertise and access to develop the measurement scale for Internet expertise [16]. Lastly, items to measure Openness, Source Identity and Similarity developed are based on the work of Barrick and Mount (1991) and Gilly et al (1998) [41, 42].

Secondly, to evaluate the dimensionality and reliability of the measurement scales, we use factor analyses and Cronbach's alpha (**α**), respectively. To analyze the dimensionality of scale, we conduct factor analyses for all measurement items of constructs. The condition for uni-dimensionality confirmation is that factor loading value of every item should be above the recommended level of 0.5 [43]. Subsequently, we use **α** for reliability analysis in order to measure the internal consistency of the measurement scales. The acceptable value of **α** should be above 0.6.

Finally, we use confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and the structural equation model (SEM) to assess the measurement validity and structural model fit. Both of them are used to test whether measures of a construct agree with a researcher's understanding of the nature of that construct (factor). As such, the objective of CFA and the SEM are to test whether the data collected from the survey sample fit the proposed measurement model and structure of the model, respectively. Amos 18.0 software is used to carry out all tests of CFA and the SEM.

4. Results

Anderson and Gerbing (1988) indicated a two-step approach to analyze survey data [44]. To carry out this approach, we test the reliability and validity of the measurement model by specifying how constructs (latent variables) in the model are measured by the observable indicators. Then we continue to test the structural model framework by specifying the strength and direction of relationships among latent variables in the research model.

4.1. Result of the measurement model tests

Firstly, reliability analyses used Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) to assess the model's internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha for constructs ranged from 0.67 to 0.85, which exceed the acceptable value of 0.6 recommended by Nunnally (1967) and every CR scored above 0.7, which exceed the value of 0.6 suggested for CRs by Fornell and Larcker (1981) [45, 46]. Scores of the Cronbach's alpha and CR indicated that the model is reliable for measuring items (observable variables) of each construct (latent variable).

Secondly, validity analyses, including convergent and discriminant analyses, is used to test the data validity in the model. Riedl, Kobler and Krcmar (2013) explained: "Convergent validity indicates the extent to which the items of a scale that are theoretically related, are also related in reality. Convergent validity measures the correlation among items of a given construct" [47]. To assess the convergent validity of the measurement model, we used three standards recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988) [43] as follows: (i) factor loading of every item (observable variable) should be larger than 0.5 [48], (ii) CR of every construct should be above 0.6, and (iii) average variance extracted (AVE) should exceed 0.5 [46]. The test result shows the value of factor loading of every item collected by running AMOS 18.0, exceed 0.5. The value of CR ranged from 0.7 to 0.89 and AVE ranged from 0.51 to 0.67. Therefore, these tests qualified all conditions for convergent validity. For the discriminant validity test, Cheung, Chiu and Lee (2010) suggested that if the square root of the AVE of each construct is larger than the correlation coefficient of that construct compared with any other construct in the model, constructs indeed are different from one another [49]. As a result, this test demonstrates that all constructs carry sufficient discriminant validity. The test result also shows a qualified result of the discriminant validity test for our research model.

4.2. Result of the structural model test

In our study, we used AMOS 18.0 to test the structural model. Regarding the overall model fitness, to make sure that the survey data fit the model well, Chi-square/df value of model and Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should be smaller than 3.0 and 0.08, respectively [43, 49], whereas, Goodness-of-fit index (GFI), Adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) and Comparative fit index (CFI) should satisfy thresholds of 0.9, 0.8, and 0.9, respectively [43, 50]. Our test results satisfied all conditions with a high degree of goodness fit (chi-square/df = 1.627, RMSEA= 0.08, GFI = 0.923, AGFI =0.9, CFI=0.944).

Furthermore, Figure 1 displays the results of the structural model test with standardized patch coefficients between constructs where significant paths ($p < 0.05$) are represented as solid lines and non-significant paths are represented as dotted lines. First, both the influence of PIC and T on TDM are positively significant (H2, H3 is supported, respectively). However, the influence of PIC is much stronger than the influence of T as indicated by the standardized coefficient of 0.79 and 0.28, respectively. The effect of PIC on T is also significant and positive with a standardized coefficient of 0.37 (H1 is supported). Therefore, we see that perceiving the creditability of shared information is the most important determinant in building the initial trust as well as in travel decision making. For the relationship of O, SI, S and IE with T, the test gave the result that the effect of IE and O on T are not significant (H5 and H7 are not supported), while the effects of SI (H9 is supported, β=0.12) and S (H11 is supported, β=0.16) are significant but weak. Therefore, we may see that the effect of IE and O are not likely to increase directly the degree of trust in online travel-related information. For the relationship of IE, O, SI and S with PIC, the test result indicated that the influence of IE, O, SI and S on PIC are significant (H4, H6, H8 and H10 are supported).

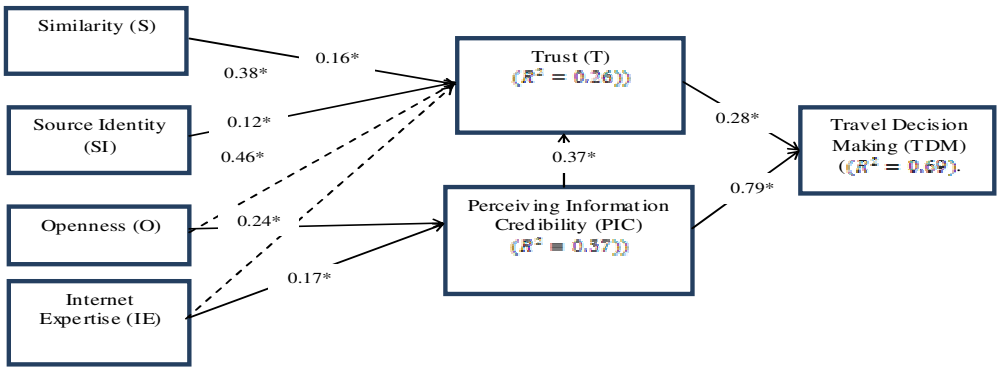

Figure 1: Results of the structural model (*p<0.05).
Source: Results extracted from AMOS 18.0 software

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study investigates several research questions based on Uncertainty Reduction Theory [20] to explain how customer responses to perception of travel information creditability on online social networks or tourism communities influence the making of the final travel decision. Figure 1 reveals that all IE, O, SI and S are significant antecedents to PIC (R^2 = 0.57) in which SI (β=0.46) and S (β=0.38) are the strongest determinants of PIC. This can be explained by the fact that the shared online information from an identified source has greater impact than that from an unidentified source on PIC, and the more similar you and the information sender are in preferences, demographic and lifestyle, the higher the degree you perceive the information has credibility. Therefore, these results are consistent with the concept of Uncertainty Reduction Theory [20].

However, the tests also proved that T concept is not explained directly by IE and O, or is explained weakly by SI and S. In addition, PIC positively and significantly affects T, hence, IE, SI, S and O only affect T indirectly through PIC. This means that PIC is the main factor in building up the traveler's trust of online shared information, and this is consistent with the literature review.

Overall, our model can predict the TDM of online users well (R^2 = 0.69). However, between two direct determinants of TDM, T and PIC, PIC (β=0.79) is a much stronger determinant than T (β=0.28). Therefore, PIC is the most important factor influencing both the degree of online trust as well as travel decisions of an online user.

5.2. Practical implications

In the social network site or online community era, online consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions play an important role in affecting consumer decision. The online information exchanges commonly occurring in online C2C interactions may generate unlimited value for all the involved stakeholders. The result of this study is important for two sets of stakeholders; namely the management of online community sites and online users, especially Vietnamese users.

The findings of this study indicate that consumer perception of online information creditability affects the initial trust of consumers in travel services and travel intention. In this context, there are urgent needs for developing verification or filter mechanism supporting online consumers to determine the credibility of information posted on online

community sites, especially in domestic travel forums. This strategy is important for consumers who are overwhelmed by the large amount of the posted information for given travel services which confuses consumers in appropriate travel service selection. Furthermore, filter mechanism development is also important for the management of online community sites to ensure that only credible information is visible to users and eventually to enhance the credible image of sites. In Facebook, each travel-related, or any type of information posted, is simply evaluated by clicking on "Like" by other users, but the question raised is how serious those evaluations are. Therefore, there should be a need for further research to strengthen the filter mechanism in online sites.

6. Conclusions and limitations

In this article, we propose an integrated theoretical model to help academic researchers understand what factors (O, S, SI and IE) influence the perception of the PIC and how PIC affects the T and TDM. The research model was empirically evaluated using survey data collected from 328 responses. The results reveal that all factors (Openness, Similarity, Source Identity and Internet Expertise) directly and significantly affect the perception of the online information credibility, which affect both trust and travel decision. In addition, the implication of this study on theory and practice are also discussed above.

Although this study produces some useful and meaningful results, there are a number of limitations. First, by examining another age group variable, it may be possible to derive additional results beyond our findings here. As indicated in the profile of responses, 83.8 percent in the sample are younger than 35 years old and the study only focuses on this age group. If the study focused on those who are older than 35 years old, we may yield further insights. Second, the research model developed is based on the theoretical foundation of western literature, while the sample data was collected in an Asian, developing country, in which cultural effects are different from those of western countries. The cultural effects are important factors in human behavior research, especially in human-computer interaction. Therefore, the practical implication part of this research may have some limitations since it has not examined the role of cultural effects on the perception of online information credibility.

Because people of different ages and cultures may react differently to information creditability perception, studying these factors may present new directions for future research. In addition, this study only focuses on the credibility issues of information exchanged between consumer and consumer (C2C). Therefore, research on the credibility of online information on business-to-customer (B2C) interaction in online travel communities could be developed for further study.

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