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Empowerment in the context of User-Generated Content in the Travel Industry: A research model proposal

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Abstract

When people use the Internet to obtain travel information, they do research about the trip on the Internet, and read and generate content and reviews. Such user-generated content (UGC) can empower the traveler by giving them the opportunity to receive and pass on recommendations based on their travel experiences. However, our understanding of the role of empowerment in the UGC context in the travel industry is limited. The aim of this theoretical paper is to conceptualize the UGC issue using an empowerment concept derived from the psychological empowerment theory. By employing the psychological empowerment model, it is proposed that a research model of empowerment in the context of UGC in the travel industry can be formed through competence, self-determination, meaning, and impact. The main significance of this research is the conceptualization of empowerment in the context of UGC in the travel industry. What makes this empowerment distinct to the existing perspectives is its measurable context.

Key Words

User-Generated Content, Empowerment, Psychological Empowerment,
Travel Industry.

Empoderamiento en el contexto

de Contenido Generado por el Usuario en la Industria
de Viajes: Una propuesta de modelo de investigación

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Resumen

Cuando la gente usa Internet para obtener información de viajes, para investigar sobre el viaje y lee y genera contenidos y opiniones, dicho contenido generado por el usuario (CGU) puede potenciar al viajero, dándole la oportunidad de recibir y transmitir recomendaciones basadas en sus experiencias de viaje. Sin embargo, nuestra comprensión de la función de potenciación en el contexto CGU en la industria de viajes es limitada. El objetivo de este trabajo teórico, para conceptualizar el tema CGU, es usar el concepto de empoderamiento a partir de la teoría de empoderamiento psicológico. Al emplear el modelo de empoderamiento psicológico se propone que un modelo de investigación de empoderamiento en el contexto de la CGU en la industria de viajes se forme a través de la competencia, la libre determinación, el significado y el impacto. Lo principal de esta investigación es la conceptualización de empoderamiento en el contexto de la CGU en la industria de viajes, lo que distingue este concepto de las perspectivas existentes en su contexto medible.

Palabras clave

Contenidos Generados por el Usuario, Empoderamiento, Empoderamiento Psicológico, Industria de Viajes.

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1. Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) may play an important role when consumers need information to help them decide whether to purchase a product/service they do not know well (Liu, 2006). Westbrook (1987) defines WOM as “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers.” (p. 261). Nowadays consumers can easily access information and exchange opinions on products and services using information technology (Park & Lee, 2008), and meeting customers’ expectation has become more important than ever for companies (O’Connor, 2008).

Consumers are engaging in electronic WOM websites (e.g., eopinion.com, consumerreview.com, ciao.com) in order to share opinions and experiences about products and services in general (Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006). Web 2.0 technologies have enabled the efficient creation and distribution of electronic WOM (Kwon & Raab, 2010). Electronic WOM communication can be described as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Web 2.0 refers to a second generation of web-based services that includes social networking sites, blogging, podcasting, and wikis that enable users to collaborate and share information online (Lefebvre, 2007; O’Reilly, 2005; Reactive, 2007).

Web 2.0 technologies have enabled the creation and distribution of user-generated content (UGC), which is causing vast changes in the online media landscape (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008). UGC constitutes the data, information, or media produced by the general public (rather by professionals) on the Internet (Arriga & Levina, 2008). In all UGC activities, the user is the central point being not only consumer, but also content contributor playing simultaneously the roles of producers as well as consumers of the content on the Internet (Arriga & Levina, 2008; Constantinides, 2007). The reasons why individuals generate content on

the Internet are for (George & Scerri, 2007): analysis and commentary, entertainment, and review (e.g. books, products, restaurants ratings, travelers' comments on hotels).

UGC is changing the dynamics of the travel industry profoundly using its global word-of-mouth forces (Laboy & Torchio, 2007). As a result, people are gaining unprecedented power through the web (George & Scerri, 2007). Gretzel and Yoo (2008) assert that UGC such as online travel reviews written by tourists and posted to virtual communities are more used frequently to transmit travel-related information. UGC is then empowering online travelers in the planning and buying processes of their trips (Schegg, Liebrich, Scaglione, & Ahmad, 2008).

Despite the increasing influence of UGC within the travel and tourism sectors (Daugherty et al., 2008), no other study has explored the role of empowerment in the UGC context using the psychological empowerment model in the travel industry. Although previous studies have shown that UGC can influence the decisions of travelers during travel planning (Burgess, Sellito, Cox, & Buultjens, 2009; Cox, Burgess, Sellito, & Buultjens, 2009; Ip, Lee, & Law, 2012; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009), there is limited insight into how UGC empowers travelers to make their own decisions.

Yet it is clear from the literature that the content generated by Internet users is empowering online travelers in the planning and choosing of their trips (Schegg et al., 2008). The role of UGC in supporting empowerment in the travel industry (e.g., how UGC empowers consumers to make their own decision about service consumption) is therefore a topic that is highly important and relevant to tourism and marketing, and one which has not yet been thoroughly explored.

The aim of this theoretical paper is to conceptualize the UGC issue using an empowerment concept derived from the psychological empowerment theory. By employing a well established psychological empowerment model (Spreitzer, 1995), it is proposed that a construct of empowerment in the context of UGC in the travel industry can be formed through competence, self-determination, meaning, and impact.

2. UGC IN THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY

Increasingly tourists are going online and the hospitality and tourism industry must be aware that their consumers are being influenced by travel sites (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). For instance, a study with international vacation tourists in New Zealand showed that the Internet was rated significantly more useful than other sources of information for making accommodation decisions (Hyde, 2006). When tourists are searching for information for decision-making on the web, they are also interacting with others, chatting and viewing pictures (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). Given the dissemination of social media and UGC, the consumers' travel decisions are clearly being affected by these new concepts (O'Connor, 2008).

Even though UGC concepts are quite recent, they are becoming popular as tourists share their experiences and travel recommendations (Carrera et al., 2008; O'Connor, 2008). A web-based survey carried out by Gretzel & Yoo (2008) showed that 97.7% of Internet users who travel said they read other travelers' reviews during the process of planning a trip. Examples of travel reviews websites that help tourists to interact and offer peer to peer advice on the Internet are TripAdvisor.com, IgoUgo.com, Virtualtourist.com, and Lonelyplanet.com (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). TripAdvisor supports people in the pre-travel phase (researching and bookings) as well as in the post-travel phase, to share experiences, review hotels and destinations, post photos and videos from their trips (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). UGC is then facilitating tourists to evaluate travel alternatives during decision-making processes on the Internet (O'Connor, 2008).

Studies show that UGC plays a critical role in travelers' decision-making due to the intangible nature of tourism services such as travel plans (Ip et al., 2012). Studies on tourism literature have researched how UGC is used to help making decisions on travel planning. For example, Cox et al. (2009) studied the role that UGC plays in the travel planning process and assessed how trustworthy this type of information is thought to be in comparison to more traditional forms of online travel information sources. The results showed that UGC is definitely being viewed and considered by a large proportion of travelers when making travel plans, but that UGC source is not necessarily considered to be the most trustworthy source of travel information.

Burgess, Sellito, Cox and Buultjens (2009) empirically assessed the views of travelers that use the Internet to assist with travel plans/decisions in relation to the specific benefits and concerns identified with UGC. The results suggest that the most notable of these benefits and concerns is the level of trustworthiness and reliability that can be associated with the postings. Burgess et al. claim that UGCs can be trusted because they are real experiences by real people who are independent. On the other hand, they can be untrustworthy because UGC that is posted may be faked by an Internet user with a vested interest.

Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) analyzed the impact of UGC on consumer choice, testing empirically three key elements in online travel reviews: review valence, reviewer expertise, and consumer familiarity with a hotel brand. The findings revealed that both positive and negative reviews increase consumer awareness of hotels, and positive reviews improve attitudes toward hotels. The results also suggest that when travelers read UGC, the average probability that they will consider booking a room in the reviewed hotel increases.

Ye, Law and Gu (2009) empirically assessed the impact of UGC on hotel room bookings using data from the largest Chinese travel website (Ctrip.com). The results suggest that positive UGC can significantly increase the number of bookings in a hotel. Ip, Lee and Law (2012) analyzed the profile of the Hong Kong online users who use UGC for planning, and the results indicated that travelers who are young, well educated, and have high incomes are more likely to use UGC for travel planning.

Although previous studies have shown that UGC can influence the decisions of travelers during travel planning (Burgess et al., 2009; Cox et al., 2009; Ip et al., 2012; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Ye et al., 2009), there is still limited information available on how UGC empowers travelers to make their own decisions. Moreover, mostly research on empowerment in tourism literature has been mostly conducted from the perspective of hospitality employees (Chiang & Hsieh, 2012; Chiang & Jang, 2008; Fock, Chiang, Au, & Hui, 2011). Building on Spreitzer (1995) model of psychological empowerment in organizations, empowerment is developed as a construct to capture the traveler's feelings of empowerment with regard to making a travel plan using UGC.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

Initially, empowerment was understood as the granting of power and authority delegation (Burker, 1986). Conger and Kanungo (1988) used a motivational approach to define empowerment as psychological enabling, criticizing the literature on decision-making authority. According to Conger and Kanungo (1988) “enabling implies creating conditions for heightening motivation for task accomplishment through the development of a strong sense of personal efficacy” (p. 474).

For this study, empowerment is defined as a motivational construct and is viewed as an enabling process (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Here, to be empowered is to be psychologically enabled. Studies on psychological empowerment mostly focus on employee empowerment in organizations (Menon, 2001). There are a few studies on patients’ psychological empowerment (Aujoulat, d’Hoore, & Deccache, 2007), but consumer psychological empowerment in other services remains relatively unexplored. Following Rappaport (1987), empowerment is defined in the context of this study as a process by which travelers gain control over their own destiny using the user-generated content to help make a travel plan.

Following the Conger and Kanungo work, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) extended this approach by defining empowerment as a perceptual process model arousing intrinsic task motivation manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination (choice), and impact. Spreitzer (1995) defined the psychological empowerment model based on Thomas and Velthouse (1990) approach, i.e. four cognitive dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Spreitzer (1995) follow the ‘perception’ aspect, focusing on empowerment as the psychological enabling. This study will use the perception aspect of the psychological empowerment, which is defined as motivational construct and is viewed as an enabling process.

This model of psychological empowerment has been validated across multiple sectors and organizations and has been found to be stable over time and reliably measured (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000). For instance, research on psychological empowerment has been carried out in many different contexts: bank employees (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003), large service organization (Liden et al., 2000), team level of analysis (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999), and hospitality employees (Chiang & Hsieh, 2012; Chiang & Jang, 2008; Fock et al., 2011).

However, psychological empowerment focusing on the consumer remains relatively unexplored. There are a few studies on patients' psychological empowerment (Aujoulat et al., 2007). Despite the increasing influence of UGC within the travel sector (Daugherty et al., 2008), no other study has explored the role of UGC as an enabler of travelers' psychological empowerment in the travel industry.

4. RESEARCH MODEL OF EMPOWERMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF UGC

UGC has contributed to an increasing level of consumer empowerment (Constantinides, 2007). For instance, the web has empowered consumers allowing them to exchange opinions or experiences with others from all over the world (Litvin et al., 2008), enabling electronic word-of-mouth communication through bulletin boards and news groups (Niininen, Buhalis, & March, 2007).

Particular interest is how the information generated by the travelers online is empowering others. Information is essential for travelers, and the Internet allows them to search for travel-related information (air-ticket bookings, online room reservations, etc) (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). In fact, the Internet is a suitable environment for building a dynamic platform for information supply and exchange in the travel and tourism industry (Ho & Lee, 2007). This huge amount of information through UGC has empowered travelers (Sigala, 2007), affecting how they create, exchange and use information (O'Connor, 2008). Thus, the content generated by the Internet users is empowering online travelers in the planning and buying processes of their trips (Schegg et al., 2008; Sigala, 2007).

Building on Spreitzer (1995) model of psychological empowerment: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact, this study combines these four cognitions to create an overall motivational construct of psychological empowerment (Figure 1). Thus, it is proposed that a construct of empowerment in the context of UGC in the travel industry can be formed through: self-determination, competence, meaning, and impact. Each of these proposed dimensions of empowerment in the UGC context is discussed below.

- Self-determination

Self-determination is the person's autonomy in having choice in commencing/regulating work behaviors and processes, such as making decisions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). An empowered person would

perceive having autonomy when performing his/her tasks (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). For example, the use of UGC facilitates (and may provide autonomy for) travelers to evaluate trip alternatives during decision-making processes on the Internet (O'Connor, 2008). Therefore, the use of UGC can be an enabling activity for travelers to exercise choice (self-determination) when making travel plans.

- Competence

Competence is defined as the person's belief in his capability to perform activities with skill (Gist, 1987). When travelers perceive they have competence in using the UGC to accomplish tasks, s/he would be able to maximize its usage (Bandura, 1997). An empowered traveler is a person who feels confident to make a travel decision without exerting much intellectual effort (Hjalager, 2001). Reading other travelers' UGC increases confidence in decisions (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007). Hence, in the travel industry context, the use of UGC can be interpreted as an enabling activity for travelers to gain competence through making travel plans.

- Meaning

Meaning is defined as the value of a task goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). In the tourism industry, for example, Gretzel et al. (2007) conducted a survey of 1,480 online travelers to examine the use of UGC in the travel planning process, and the results revealed that 88% of the travelers thought that UGC is important (meaningful) for deciding where to stay. Thus, it seems reasonable to posit that the use of UGC is an enabling activity for travelers to strengthen the value of their experience when making travel plans.

- Impact

Impact is the degree to which an individual can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes at work (Ashforth, 1989). For example, UGC is currently having a considerable influence on travelers' plans and impacting the competitive reality of the tourism sector as a whole (Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). Ye et al. (2011) assert that the travelers' accommodation decisions are strongly influenced by online travel reviews. Thus, UGC can be viewed as making a difference (impact) when making travel plans.

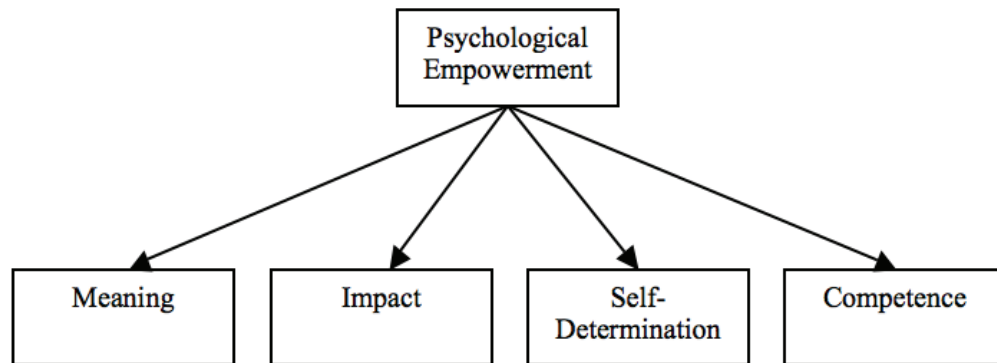


Figure 1. Psychological Empowerment (Speitzer, 1995)

Psychological empowerment is especially important in the online travel industry where UGC can help travelers to interact and offer peer to peer advice on decision-making processes such as travel planning (Ip et al., 2012; O'Connor, 2008). Similarly to employee empowerment, UGC can be interpreted as an enabling activity for travelers to exercise choice (self-determination) when deciding which accommodation to stay at, gain self-efficacy (competence) through making travel plans, enhance their perceptions of UGC impact on their travel plans, and increase the value of their experience when making a travel plan. Thus, travelers may feel empowered by using UGC when making their travel plans.

5. CONCLUSION

Increasingly tourists have used Internet as the key source of information for planning a trip (Cai, Feng, & Breiter, 2004). Gretzel & Yoo (2008) cite that online consumer-generated information is playing an increasing role in traveler decision-making. Sigala (2007) highlights that information generated by tourists is causing a tremendous impact on decision making behavior of web users. Particularly, access to information is one of the aspects of the empowerment process (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Since information is the lifeblood of travel, UGC is having a significant impact on this industry whereby travelers have direct access to the information they need to make their travel decision and by doing so are empowered to create and distribute their own content (Sigala, 2011).

It is important for researchers to clearly define empowerment in the UGC context since a single conception of empowerment is not appropriate across all disciplines and across all contexts (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997). Thus, research is needed to examine how empowerment plays a role in UGC. From literature reviewed in the tourism, information systems, marketing, management, psychology, and sociological disciplines, it was found that the concept of empowerment has many dimensions and that no well-defined theory for conducting research studies in UGC in the travel industry.

There is a need to raise the awareness of UGC tools and the possibilities they offer to the tourism industry. Since there are a growing number of theoretical papers related to the benefits that UGC is providing to tourists on the Internet, attention should be placed on conducting quality research to inform better how UGC is empowering online travelers.

The main significance of this research is the conceptualization of empowerment in the context of UGC in the travel industry. What makes this empowerment distinct to the existing perspectives is its measurable context. It is a pioneering attempt to conceptualize the UGC issue using the empowerment concept that is developed from the psychological empowerment theory. Psychological empowerment consists of four components: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Further empirical research will be required to validate the conceptualization of empowerment. The empirical work will strengthen or refute claims of other related studies and will offer theoretical and practical contributions to the field of UGC in the travel industry.

This study may have practical implications for how travel service providers when empirical work is collected in the future. This study can be used to understand how each psychological empowerment dimension as an enabling activity can be leveraged by travel service providers to achieve their objectives. For example, the use of UGC is an enabling activity for travelers to exercise choice (self-determination) when making travel plans. Travelers can use UGC to help them evaluate trip alternatives during decision-making processes (O'Connor, 2008). Also, if a traveler is using UGC to help make a travel plan, s/he will feel more confident (having competence) about making the right decision. According to Gretzel et al. (2007), when travelers read other travelers' UGC increase their confidence in trip decisions.

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