

Using User-Generated Content when travelers make travel plans: A Theory of Planned Behavior perspective

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Abstract: User-Generated Content (UGC) such as online travel reviews written by tourists and posted to virtual communities are more used frequently to transmit travel-related information (Gretezel & Yoo). UGC is then helping travelers to make decisions on their travel plans. This study contributes to the further development of a theory of online consumer behavior by determining which dimensions of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) are most important in the UGC context in the travel industry. This study is utilizing TPB which is one of the most comprehensive intention-based models in the literature explaining the most variance in behavioral intention (Taylor & Todd, 1995). TPB has three independent determinants of intention: attitude toward behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavior control (PBC). The aim of this paper is to examine the roles of attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavior control in respect of travelers' intention to use UGC when making travel plans. Further empirical research will be required to validate the proposed model.

Keywords: User-Generated Content. Theory of Planned Behavior. Travel Industry.

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Introduction

Consumers are engaging in electronic word-of-mouth websites in order to share opinions and experiences about products and services in general (Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006). For example, consumers are generating content on the Internet for entertainment and review such as books, products, restaurants ratings, travelers' comments on hotels (George & Scerri, 2007).

User-generated content (UGC) constitutes the data, information, or media produced by the general public (rather than 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 producer as well as consumer of the content on the Internet (Arriga & Levina, 2008; 2007). UGC is therefore changing the dynamics of the travel industry profoundly through its global word-of-mouth forces (Laboy & Torchio, 2007). Indeed, 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.

Even though the concept of travellers' use of UGC is quite relatively new, such content is becoming more popular and more influential as tourists share their experiences and travel recommendations online (O'Connor, 2008). Examples of travel review 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 when deciding on their travel options (O'Connor, 2008).

According to Ajzen (1991) the TPB is a theory that considers social behavior as a combined function of intention and perceived behavioral control (PBC). Intentions are motivational factors that indicate how hard people are willing to try or how much effort they would exert to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). TPB has three independent determinants of intention (Ajzen, 1991):

attitude toward behavior, subjective norm (the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior), and PBC (the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior).

There are some studies on online consumer behavior and UGC in the marketing, information systems, and tourism literatures utilizing the TPB framework (Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; 2011; Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 2011). However, little is known about the role that UGC has in the users’ travel behavior and decision-making processes (Cox, Burgess, Sellito, & Buultjens, 2009; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

Drawing together key concepts from the Theory of Planned Behavior and evidence from prior research, this study contributes to the further development of a theory of online consumer behavior by determining which beliefs and determinants of behavior are most important in the UGC context in the travel industry. Hence, the aim of this paper is to examine the role of attitude, subjective norms, and PBC in respect of travelers’ intention to use UGC when making travel plans.

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

Models of behavior that have been developed by social psychologists to improve the predictive power of attitudes, include additional determinants of behavior such as social norms or intentions (Olson & Zanna, 1993). The most widely researched of these models are the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991).

TRA is a conceptual framework that predicts and explains an individual’s social behavior when such behavior is under his or her volitional control (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). TRA has two independent determinants of behavioral intention (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980): attitude toward behavior (a personal component) and subjective norm (a social influence component) (see Figure 1).

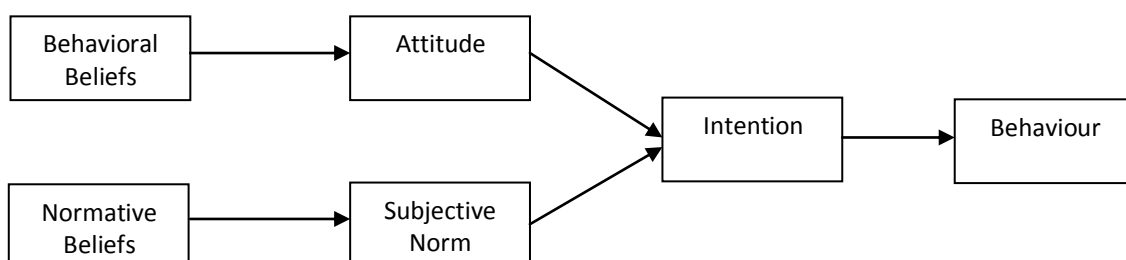


Figure 1. Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975)

The TPB extends TRA by adding a third determinant of the behavioral intention (BI), that is perceived behavioral control (PBC). Two pathways are included in the TPB model: one from PBC to behavioral intention and the other from PBC directly to behavior (see Figure 2). Ajzen (1991) claims that the TPB can explain more variance in behavioral intention and behavior in comparison with TRA in cases of incomplete volitional control. The TPB has three independent determinants of behavioral intention:

- **Attitude** is “the individual’s positive or negative evaluation of performing the particular behavior of interest” (Ajzen, 2005, p. 188);
- **Subjective Norm** is “the person’s perception of the social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior under consideration” (Ajzen, 2005, p. 188);
- **Perceived Behavioral Control** is “the sense of self-efficacy or ability to perform the behavior of interest” (Ajzen, 2005, p. 188).

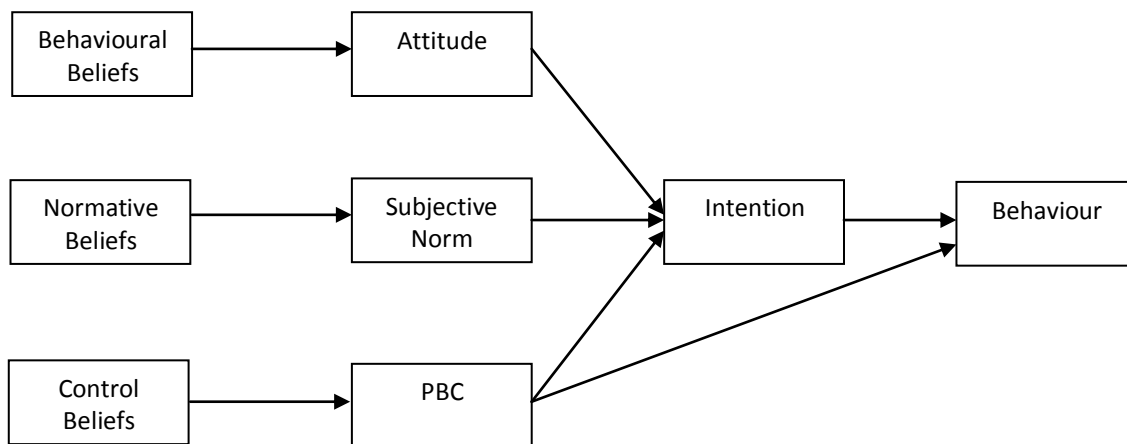


Figure 2. Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)

The antecedents of attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control consists of salient behavioral, normative and control beliefs, respectively (Ajzen, 1991). Behavioral beliefs are assessments that influence attitudes toward the behavior, which is the probability of the behavior’s consequences. Each behavioral belief links a given behavior to a certain outcome or to some other attitude, for example the cost incurred in performing the behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Normative beliefs are assessments about what constitute the underlying

determinants of subjective norms. The underlying normative beliefs are concerned with the likelihood that specific individuals or groups with whom the individual is motivated to comply will approve or disapprove of the behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Control beliefs are the antecedents of PBC, and are concerned with the perceived power of specific factors to facilitate or inhibit performance of the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). PBC is increased by salient beliefs concerning adequate resources and opportunities and fewer anticipated obstacles or impediments (Armitage & Conner, 2001).

There is still a scarcity of more comprehensive studies on customers' online purchase behaviors in the hotel industry (Kim, Ma, & Kim, 2006). Little is known about what motivates travelers to follow the advice obtained in an online travel community (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2011), and little is known about the role that UGC has in the users' travel behavior and decision-making processes (Cox et al., 2009; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Given its importance in online consumer behavior in making travel plans, this study contributes to the literature in information systems, marketing and tourism, a better understanding of how attitude, subjective norm, and PBC, work together to determine online consumer behavior, more specifically use of UGC when making travel plans.

TPB is a well-established general theory of social psychology that has been shown to predict behavior across a variety of settings (Armitage & Conner, 2001), including information systems settings (George, 2004; Mathieson, 1991; Pavlou & Fygenson, 2006; Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). Chen (2009) asserts that the research of online consumer behavior needs a more comprehensive model, describing not only the effect of personal beliefs, but also the impacts of social norms and personal behavioral control on intention in the online context. TPB is expected to better explain online consumer behavior (Pavlou & Fygenson, 2006). Thus, TPB has been chosen as the theoretical framework for this study.

Based on the discussion above, the following research question was derived: To what extent do attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence travelers' intention to use UGC when making travel plans?

Travelers' Intention to Use UGC when Making Travel Plans

TPB is a well-established general theory of social psychology and has three independent determinants of intention (Ajzen, 1991): attitude toward behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (PBC). TPB has been shown to predict behavior across a variety of settings (Armitage & Conner, 2001) including information systems settings (George, 2004; Mathieson, 1991; Pavlou & Fygenson, 2006; Venkatesh et al., 2003).

There are some studies on online consumer behavior and UGC in the marketing and information systems literatures. For instance, UGC has been shown to represent a valuable tool for companies, who can use it to monitor consumer attitude toward their products (Dellarocas et al., 2007). UGC also increases the consumers' intention to purchase a product and maximizes the likelihood that consumers will buy a recommended product (Park et al., 2007; Seneca & Nantel, 2004).

There are also some studies on online consumer behavior and UGC in the travel and tourism industry. For instance, Casaló et al. (2011) investigated some of the antecedents of the travelers' intention to follow the advice obtained from UGC in the online travel community. Perceived usefulness of the advice, trust in the online travel community, and attitude toward the advice were found to be relevant to Spanish-speakers members of several online travel communities in determining their intention to follow the advice obtained in these communities. Ye et al. (2011) assessed the impact of UGC on business performance using data from a major Chinese travel agency. The findings indicated that the tourists' purchase decision is strongly influenced by online travel reviews.

Thus, TPB has been chosen as the theoretical framework for this study in the UGC context in the travel industry. TPB has three independent determinants of intention: attitude, subjective norm, and PBC.

Attitude

Attitude is the degree to which a person has a favorable evaluation of the behavior in question (Ajzen, 1991). The more favorable the attitude toward the behavior, the stronger should

be the individual's intention to perform it (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Attitude has long been shown to influence behavioral intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Following the TPB, a favorable attitude toward using UGC is likely to encourage travelers to use UGC when making travel plans.

The research literature supports the role of attitude on behavioral intentions. For example, using TPB, Pavlou and Fygenon (2006) investigated the process of e-commerce adoption by consumers, and found that attitude was related to online consumers' behavioral intention to purchase a product and to get information from a web vendor. Taylor and Todd (1995) examined potential users of a computer resource centre, and their findings indicated that attitude was an important predictor of IT usage intention.

Some studies have used TPB in the tourism context. For example, in a study of travelers' behavior formation process in visiting an international travel destination, Hsu and Huang (2011) found that attitude had a positive impact on behavioral intention. Lam and Hsu (2006) showed attitude was related to Chinese's behavioral intention of visiting Hong Kong. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Travelers' attitude toward using UGC positively influences their intention to use UGC when making travel plans.

Subjective Norm

Subjective norm is "the person's perception of the social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior under consideration" (Ajzen, 2005, p. 188). For instance, if others approve of doing something, an individual is more likely to intend to perform it; conversely if others disapprove of doing something, the individual is less likely to intend to perform it (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Applied to the UGC context, subjective norm reflects a traveler's perception of the social pressure to use or not use UGC when making travel plans.

The relationship between subjective norm and behavioral intentions has received substantial empirical support in the IS literature. For example, subjective norm was an important predictor of intention to use online brokerage services in Bhattacharjee's research (2000). In a

study of cross-sectional comparisons of pre-adoption and pos-adoption of information technology use, Karahanna, Straub and Chervany (1999) discovered that top management, supervisors, and peers influenced adoption intention for both potential technology adopters and actual users. Using the TPB, Morris and Venkatesh (2000) analyzed age differences in adoption intentions and continued use of information technology, and they showed that workers were strongly influenced by subjective norm. In a TPB study in the tourism context, Hsu and Huang (2011) showed that subjective norm was related to travelers' intention to visit an international travel destination. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Subjective norm about using UGC positively influences travelers' intention to use UGC when making travel plans.

Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC)

Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) is a person's perception of how easy or difficult it would be to carry out a behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The magnitude of the PBC-intention relationship is dependent upon the type of behavior and the nature of the situation (Ajzen, 1991). According to Bandura (1997), a person is more likely to engage in behavior that is believed to be achievable. In the context of this study, PBC is the traveler's perceived ease or difficulty of using UGC when making travel plans.

The IS research literature supports for the role of PBC on behavioral intentions. For example, Pavlou and Fygenon (2006) used TPB to explain and predict the process of e-commerce adoption by consumers. The results indicated that PBC was a significant predictor of intention to purchase a product and to get information from a web vendor. Taylor and Todd (1995) investigated users in a computer resources centre and found a positive relationship between PBC and intentions. Also, Mathieson (1991) showed that PBC influences intention to use an IS. In the tourism research literature, Sparks and Pan (2009) demonstrated that PBC was correlated with the behavioral intention of Chinese in choosing Australia as an international destination. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Perceived behavioral control over using UGC positively influences travelers' intention to use UGC when making travel plans.

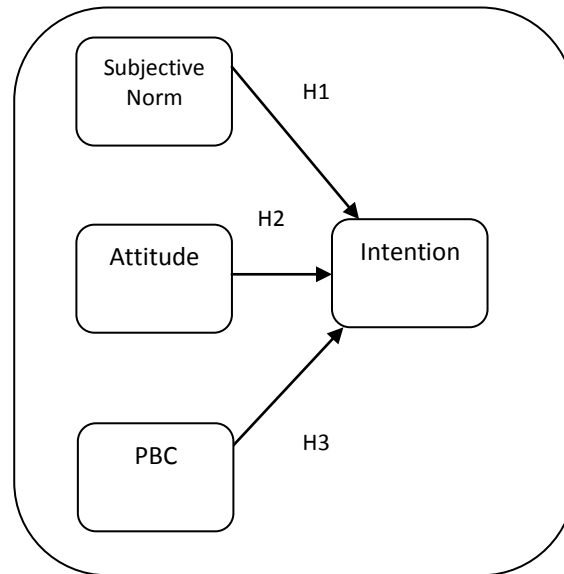


Figure 3. Research Model proposed

Conclusion

This research is expected to contribute to current understanding of what factors influence the use of UGC when travelers make travel plans. Using the Theory of Planned Behavior, this research is aimed at getting a better understanding of how attitude, subjective norm, and PBC, work together to determine online consumer behavior, more specifically use of UGC when making travel plans. A survey will be employed to quantitatively test the proposed. More specifically, a survey of backpacker's use of UGC when making travel decisions will be conducted, and the data used to assess of model of UGC use in the travel section.

Since more and more studies of Internet consumer behavior are done within the TPB framework (George, 2004), this research contributes to the further development of a theory of Internet consumer behavior by evaluating factors that are dimensions are most important for UGC context in the travel industry.

In tourism marketing and planning, service providers need to understand which factors influence individuals' travel decisions, how attitudes are formed, and how various reference groups affect travel behaviors (Moutinho, 1987). This study draws on the TPB and prior research

to propose a model that identifies key factors (e.g., attitude, subjective norm, and PBC) that influence travelers' intention to use UGC when making travel plans.

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