

The impact of user-generated content on Facebook on travel destination choices: A comparison of Austrian tourism students and non-tourism students

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This study compares the impact of user-generated content on Facebook on travel destination choices of tourism and non-tourism students. The aim of this research is to find differences regarding the influence of UGC on the destination choices of both groups. A written, standardized survey using an online questionnaire has been deployed at seven Austrian faculties. The empirical research is being supported by a structured literature research in online databases. We found that there is an impact of user generated content on Facebook on the destination choices of students. Students in the field of tourism are more aware of travel-related content on Facebook and are more likely to be influenced by this content than non-tourism students. By comparing the findings of the literature research with the findings of the empirical research, we came to the conclusion that face-to-face communication is still the most important source for finding travel-related inspiration, and information.

Keywords: tourism, destination choice, social media.

JEL codes: M31, Z32, Z33.

Introduction

Current tourism markets are highly competitive; therefore, destinations should know about the preferences of potential guests. Students, in general, travel a lot and most of them are on Facebook. This study describes the influence of user generated content (UGC) on Facebook on travel decisions amongst students. Destination Management Organizations (DMO) and tourism associations should be aware of the impacts of social networks and booking platforms. This research delivers results to get a better understanding of how tourism and non-tourism

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students make their travel decisions. Focusing on the differences between Austrian students of tourism programs and students from non-tourism programs, the article on hand provides a deeper understanding of how specific education influences the choice of a destination. Knowing this, more precise target-group oriented marketing campaigns become possible.

According to Opaschowski (2002) travelling means going to locations away from your residence for recreation, entertainment, sports, education, culture, pleasure, business or family-related reasons. As different as travel reasons are, also, the influencing factors for choosing a destination may differ a lot (Manolis 2011). Beside classical sources of inspiration and information like books, magazines, films or travel reports, the internet, especially social networks, gained more and more importance over the last decades (Gretzel et al. 2007). Given that on social networks, like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, information can be easily shared with a large audience, this content may have influence on other people to a certain extend (Jacobsen–Munar 2012; Xiang–Gretzel 2010; Amersdorffer et al. 2010; Zeng–Gerritsen 2014).

According to Sparkler (2014), user generated content on Facebook plays a major role in terms of influencing travel decisions of its users and, moreover, travelling is the most shared topic on Facebook. If we consider that on Facebook about 350 million pictures are uploaded every day and every user has approximately 350 friends (Smith 2016; Edison Research 2014), one can derive its impact on the topic of travelling in general (Hodis et al. 2015). Before social networks appeared, travellers had to personally talk to others about their holidays. On Facebook, *one-to-one* communication becomes *one-to-many* without efforts and allows spreading news or travel experiences very fast (Kohli et al. 2015). Still, the personal exchange with friends and relatives in terms of choosing a destination is the most important factor (Schmeißer 2010). If we combine the personal approach, which is one of the characteristics of social networks and the fact that about 1.9 billion users are registered on Facebook, this network promises to have a huge impact on travel decisions. Taking into consideration that especially young people use social networks for planning travels, this study focuses on that special target group (Simms 2012).

So far, limited research was done to understand the influencing factors of Facebook on travel decisions amongst tourism and non-tourism students. This study closes that gap by using a fully standardized online questionnaire, which was

spread amongst both tourism and non-tourism students. The research is conducted at those Universities of Applied Sciences in Austria, which offer tourism related academic programs. The non-tourism students are reached via e-mail distribution at the FH JOANNEUM University of Applied Sciences, which offers more than 40 programs in the fields of Management, Health Sciences, Engineering, Construction, Design and Informatics. The questionnaire focuses on the main research topics: *social media use in general, Facebook use in particular, travel experiences, travel habits and Facebook use in relation to travelling*.

The article reflects current literature knowledge in the fields of travel decision making processes, social media usage and the importance of Facebook in terms of choosing a destination. After presenting the methodology, specific results are highlighted. An in-depth discussion is followed by concluding thoughts and a future outline.

Literature review and conceptualization

Choosing a destination

In the 12th century, very long time before internet and social media appeared, students already travelled to places of knowledge, like the universities of Oxford or Paris (Opaschowski 2002). In the 18th century aristocratic youths travelled through Europe to gather experiences. This so called Grand Tour originated in a bunch of travel reports, showing the influence on travel choices of the next generations (Pimlott 1947; Veselovská–Roebuck 2013). As current tourists have a certain vision of culture and experiences, one can note that they are still influenced by ancient travellers (Coletta 2015).

The influences of media, firstly books, then films, on travel choices arose during the decades by creating anticipation (Urry–Larson 2012). Videos and cinema productions show power to have positive impacts for destinations (Spears et al. 2013). Destination Management Organisations try to benefit from films, for example New Zealand, as the main location for *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Rewtrakunphaiboon 2008). But as Young and Young (2008) stated, those benefits cannot be generalized and depend on several influencing factors.

Positive or negative experiences influence consumers on their decision making process when buying products (East et al. 2008). This fact is also applicable when choosing a destination. According to Schmeißer (2010) this process consists of several phases: inspiration, information, booking, traveling and a wrap-up.

Before the internet appeared as an influencing factor for consumer decisions, direct communication with families and friends seemed to be the most important instrument for travel decisions, especially during the phases of inspiration and information (Beeske et al. 2008). Capella and Greco (1989) added past travel experiences, magazines and media as important reasons for choosing a destination. In terms of in-depth research about a destination, travel agencies and location-specific literature were used primarily (Gitelson–Crompton 1983). Decrop and Snelders (2004) used a different approach to explain how travel decisions are made. They found out that daydreaming, reminiscence or anticipation alternate and determine the process of choosing a destination. So, according to them, a distinction between different phases cannot be clearly done.

Tremendous changes in terms of travel decisions came along with the evolvement of the internet. Interestingly, Petterson (2007) stated in 2007, when the internet was already enjoying an increasing popularity, that the stories of friends and relatives still had a huge impact on travel decisions. Nowadays, we call this form of communication *Word of Mouth*, which shows tremendous impact on travel decisions (Schmeißer 2010). Even more, we know from Ye et al. (2011) that online user reviews can have significant influence on online hotel bookings. Before investigating the phenomena of Word of Mouth in detail it is important to point out that not every single trip needs the same preparation. Travels based on routines need lower scheduling than exploring a new destination (Bargeman–Van der Poel 2006). Fodness and Murray (1999) stated that every trip has a certain impact on the arrangements of the following one, especially when destinations are visited twice, as external information becomes less important. Talking about Word of Mouth as a source of inspiration and information for travelling, Murphy, Mascarado and Benckendorff (2007) found out that more research is needed on the origin of data. They stated that travellers, who said they got their inspiration from friends, often travelled with friends before. Those who said they got most of their information from other travellers, they often travelled alone and so, they had automatically more contact with other people (Murphy et al. 2007).

The role of social media

The current research shows the importance of the internet in terms of travel decisions. For example, a research amongst 7000 users of TripAdvisor stated that 96.1% of them use the internet to gather information. This result is not very impressive as TripAdvisor itself is an online platform, but the research also stated

that 68.3% use literature and 42.0% ask friends and families for advice. Even more, 82% answered that they use the internet for every trip they plan (Gretzel et al. 2007. 13). As the quality of tourism services is mostly unknown before the actual experience takes place, social networks became a welcome source of information (Wirtz–Chew 2002). Social networks empower people to gather inspiration but also allow users to share their experiences, write reports and post pictures and videos from their trips (Xiang–Gretzel 2010). The usage of such networks is mostly very easy, they offer access to a plurality of sources for additional information and connect travellers, travel agencies and all kind of travel related businesses with each other (Chung–Koo 2015). This type of User Generated Content (UGC) is expected to be trusted by users (Schmallegger–Carson 2008; Haralabopoulos et al. 2016). More than this, Aye, Au and Law (2013) stated that, travellers show higher rates of trust in UGC if their interests correspond with the interests of the travellers who published their reviews. This process of barrier free information gathering led to an independency of individuals in terms of travel planning (Kim et al. 2014).

Facebook with its 1.87 billion users is the largest social network worldwide (We are social 2017). A research, done by the Sparkler consulting agency with Facebook’s support, showed that 42.4% of the Facebook users share travel related content regularly. So, pictures and videos of travel experiences have become the most frequent posts (Sparkler 2014. 6). The study also showed that 84.1% are following the travel experiences of friends and relatives on Facebook. More interesting is the fact that 64% of the interviewees indicated that they would not have known anything about the trips of their friends and families without Facebook postings (Sparkler 2014. 8). Simms (2012) stated that generations X and Y are very eager to share travel impressions on Facebook.

This so called electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) describes every positive or negative statement of a former, current or potential customer about a certain product, service or company, which is spread by several people on the internet (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Buhalis and Law (2008) stated that, in general, consumers rely more on the information they get from friends than on those from companies, through advertising. As Abubakar and Ilkan (2016) have shown, this influence also exists on social networks. They point out that eWOM could have a strong influence on the trust of potential visitors into a specific destination (Abubakar–Ilkan 2016; Christodoulides et al. 2012). The rising relevance of

eWOM on travel decisions was also highlighted by a study in the US, conducted amongst 2500 respondents: 57% have indicated that they were influenced by UGC during the planning phase of a trip. The study also stated that from 2009 to 2013 the percentage of UGC influenced travellers arose from about 50% to more than 57% (Simms 2012. 80). Yoo and Gretzel (2011. 617) came to similar results during a study which was conducted amongst 1700 travellers, again in the US: they found out that more than 50% of the respondents looked for information on social networks and they also relied on that online content. All these results indicate an existing influence of user generated content on travel decisions nowadays.

User Generated Content

User Generated Content can be separated into four different types, namely text, picture, video and audio content, which can be differentiated within their categories (Bauer 2011). This must be taken into consideration when thinking about the specific influence on users (Momeni et al. 2015). Postings based on texts can be reviews, evaluations and comments. On social networks, like Facebook, reviews or comments are given on products, services, companies, but also on destinations. Those postings can be liked and shared amongst other users (Xiang–Gretzel 2010). Such reviews can be positive or negative, of which negative ones spread quickly (Kelly et al. 2013). Gretzel, Yoo and Purifoy (2007) found out that reviews play an important role in terms of choosing a destination, but a minor one on other travel related decisions. In general, reading online reviews is quite common, as Xie, Zhang and Zhang found out in 2014. According to their results, 75.2% said that they read online reviews from other guests before they book a hotel (Xie et al. 2014. 3). Furthermore, the authors stated that the higher the amount of reviews of a certain destination is, the more likely the ratings are to be considered. In addition, it is a fact that the more reviews a destination has, the more often it is visible to people on a certain social network. This again leads to a higher impact of those reviews (Xie et al. 2014).

According to Simms (2012) pictures are some of the most shared postings on social networks, beside reviews. Haldrup and Larsen (2003) stated that travelling and photography are very closely related. As travellers are at the same time consumers but also producers of a certain image of a destination, Urry and Larsen (2012) argued that if guests take pictures and share them, they reproduce their own view of that destination. This could have an influence on future

travellers (Urry–Larsen 2012; Parra-Lopez et al. 2011). The tourism image of a destination can be seen as an amalgam of visions, meanings and experiences a single person has gathered (Crompton 1979). If guests take pictures of themes they find worth taking a picture of, one can state that they are filtering out the “unworthy” elements. Even more, postings on social networks shall reflect one’s own personality, especially pictures from someone’s holidays (Lo et al. 2011). All these issues create a specific, individual image of a destination, in general, but also on social networks (Munar 2011; Donaire et al. 2014). As the costs of holding a picture in hands were heavily reduced by digital photography, the amount of pictures taken during travels raised dramatically (Donaire–Gali 2011).

Also, videos are getting more and more important on social networks. Tim Peterson points out that, from 2014 to 2015, video uploads on Facebook have increased by approximately 75% and maybe they are now the most frequent type of posting (Peterson 2015). Priebe (2015) had analysed response rates of pictures and videos and found out that the response rates of videos were twice as high as those of pictures at a certain point. But as Facebook is based on an algorithm which changes and adapts itself in accordance with the user’s profile and previous actions, also, response rates can be related to a certain type of posting (Ingram 2015). So, Facebook-based results have to be considered very carefully.

The possibility of connecting smart phones with social networks revolutionized the possibility of sharing travel experiences with friends or a public audience (Lo 2011). According to Smith (2016), 350 million pictures are uploaded on Facebook every single day. If we consider the results of Sparkler (2014), which states that “travelling” is the most shared topic on Facebook, one can assume that travel-related content represents a big part of all media. The influence of this media amongst students as a source of inspiration for destination choices leads us to the main topic of this article and the following research questions.

As students of academic tourism programs are confronted very often with tourism-related issues during their studies, it is assumed that they might have a higher sensitivity to travel related content, as well. As the authors of this study are based in Austria they also focused on that country. People between 18 and 29 years of age represent the majority of Facebook users in Austria, so it is assumed that students use that specific social network (Social Media Radar Austria 2017).

These facts lead to the main research question: “Is there a difference on the impact of user generated content on Facebook regarding the destination choice of tourism and non-tourism students?” The authors also want to find out which user generated content is important for students in terms of travels and which media influences them the most?

Methodology

As the main focus of this article targets the differences between Austrian tourism and non-tourism students, it was obvious to conduct the survey within universities. For organizational and cost reasons it was decided to conduct an online survey. As the response rates of online surveys are normally quite low, it was decided not to spread the questionnaire directly to the students, but via the course directors of the programs in questions (Weimiao–Zheng 2009).

The online questionnaire was fully standardized and spread via the software LimeSurvey. According to Kromrey (2009), it is important to formulate questions in an easy language, by avoiding loanwords and complex sentences. Questions are expressed neutrally and not in a suggestive manner. It is crucial to give the respondents the chance to answer all questions without having any technical background and, in the same way of thinking, to avoid misleading interpretations (Kromrey 2009; Biemer–Lyberg 2003). To eliminate biased answers, it is recommended to develop indicators instead of asking directly for a certain topic. These indicators build the basis of the asked questions within the questionnaire (Shukla 2008; Earl 2008; Brace 2008). The questions were summarized in categories. Finally, the questionnaire consisted of 26 questions in total, split into seven categories as follows: *General indicators* (three questions), *Social media usage in general* and *Facebook use in particular* (six multiple-response and dichotomous questions), *Travel experiences*, *Travel habits* and *Destinations* (seven multiple-response and dichotomous questions) and *Facebook use in relation to travelling* (ten questions). Dichotomous questions and several four-point Likert scales (e.g. completely agree, rather agree, rather don't agree, completely don't agree) were used to assess the relations between Facebook and destination choices.

A pre-test was done amongst eight people, chosen as follows: two male tourism students, two female tourism students, two male non-tourism students, and two female non-tourism students. The non-tourism students came from both

technical and managerial courses. The pre-testing included logical structure, comprehensibility and timing.

As tourism students of Austria represent one part of the target group of this study, the final questionnaire was sent to the course directors of the academic tourism programs in Austria. As one of the authors of this study is part of an informal network of these course directors, it was determined to ask them to give out the questionnaire amongst their students, to increase response rates. The questionnaires have been spread amongst tourism students of the following Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS): FH Wien der WKW, FH Kufstein Tirol, IMC Fachhochschule Krems, FH Salzburg, FH Kärnten, MCI Management Center Innsbruck and FH JOANNEUM.

Due to the fact that the authors aimed to identify differences between tourism students (TS) and non-tourism students (NTS) a judgment sampling methodology seemed to be the most promising method. In addition, due to limited resources, it was not possible to spread the questionnaire amongst all Austrian students at UAS. So, it was decided to target all TS in Austria and all other students at the FH JOANNEUM UAS, the home university of two of the authors. It was assumed that a close relation to the universities' own departments may help boost responding figures.

In winter term 2016 about 1990 students were studying at tourism related programs in Austria, which is about 4% of all students (app. 50 000) studying in Austrian Universities of Applied Sciences (Bmfwf 2017). The research was done completely anonymous.

The data analyses were done by using the IBM SPSS Statistics version 24. The correlation analysis was done according to Spearman. Where applicable, the Chi²-test was used to test the differences among variables. A level of significance of $P \leq 0.05$ was accepted.

Results

The empirical data are split in four parts and analysed separately. In the first chapter general data about the sample group are shown. The results of Facebook usage and social network affinity are being presented in the second part. The third chapter illustrates travel experiences and habits, followed by the fourth and last chapter, showing in-depth analyses of the relations between Facebook usage, travel decisions and differences between tourism and non-tourism students.

General sample data

The research was conducted from the 9th of April 2017 until the 21st of April 2017. The questionnaire was sent via e-mail and generated 453 responses. 82 forms have not been completed so they were rejected. Finally, a total of 371 completed questionnaires were used for data analysis (n=371). In relation to the population of 1990 students in total, a response rate of 18.6% was achieved. The age of respondents was distributed from 18 to 54 years old, with an average of 23.4 years (SD=4.6; MODE=22 years).

21.6% of the sample indicated to be enrolled in a tourism-oriented program. Therefore, the remaining 78.4% studied in a non-tourism program and consisted of 28.9% industrial engineering, 21.0% health sciences, 14.4% economics (tourism programs excluded), 7.6% design, 7.2% informatics, 6.5% cultural sciences, 6.5% social working, 2.4% natural sciences, 1% law and 4.5% miscellaneous studies.

70% (260 people) of the respondents were female and 30% (111 people) were male. The high number of female students in this research may be caused by the fact that within both tourism and health related programs the majority of students are women. In fact, 74.9% of all TS in Austria are female (Bmfwf 2017). At the institute of Health and Tourism Management of the FH JOANNEUM UAS the share of women is even higher, 89% (Fritz 2017).

Usage of Facebook and social networks

In terms of Facebook usage, the research showed that about 95.7% (355 answers) of the respondents use this platform at least once a month. The respondents indicated that Facebook is the most widespread of all social networks. Other social networks, which were named and at least used once a month, were Instagram (54.2%), YouTube (54.2%), Snapchat (52%), Pinterest (23.2%), Twitter (10.5%) and TripAdvisor (8.9%). TripAdvisor wasn't mentioned very often, but, since it is the world's biggest social network for travelling, its importance as an influencing factor on destination choices should not be neglected (TripAdvisor 2017).

“Are you registered on Facebook?” This question was positively answered by 358 persons. Those 13 datasets, which were not registered on Facebook, were excluded from further Facebook-related analyses (n=358). For the in-depth analysis of Facebook usage three categories were built, based on the intensity of use. The indicator of intensity of use was developed by taking into consideration both the (1) time spent on Facebook and the (2) frequency of checking Facebook for updates. It was determined by the authors that people who stay constantly for

less than five minutes on Facebook, when they check for updates, should belong to the indicator (1a) *less time spent*. More than five minutes for checking updates, should belong to (1b) *more time spent*. Up to ten times of checking for Facebook updates per day were identified as (2a) *low frequency* and more often than ten times, should be (2b) *high frequency*. The following main categories, which were used for further analysis, can be derived. Category 1: (1a) *less time spent* and (2a) *low frequency* means *weak Facebook use*; Category 2: (1a) *less time spent* and (2b) *high frequency* means *middle Facebook use*; Category 3: (1b) *more time spent* and (2a) *low frequency* means *middle Facebook use*; Category 4: (1b) *more time spent* and (2b) *high frequency* means *heavy Facebook use*. The distribution of the research sample shows that 25.7% (92 answers) belong to category 1 – *weak Facebook use*. As expected, the largest group with 55.9% (200 answers) consists of categories 2 and 3 – *middle Facebook use*. 18.4% (66 answers) were identified as *heavy Facebook users*. These categories are useful for examining the differences and relations between the use of Facebook and travel customs.

According to the answers received the most noticed contents on Facebook are pictures (51.7%), followed by videos (27.7%). According to Peterson (2015) and Priebe (2015) videos should have the highest response rates on Facebook. Maybe the divergent results show that not only response rates are important, but also perception. The importance of pictures is emphasized by the fact that only seven people (1.7%) stated that they follow text postings on Facebook.

Travel habits

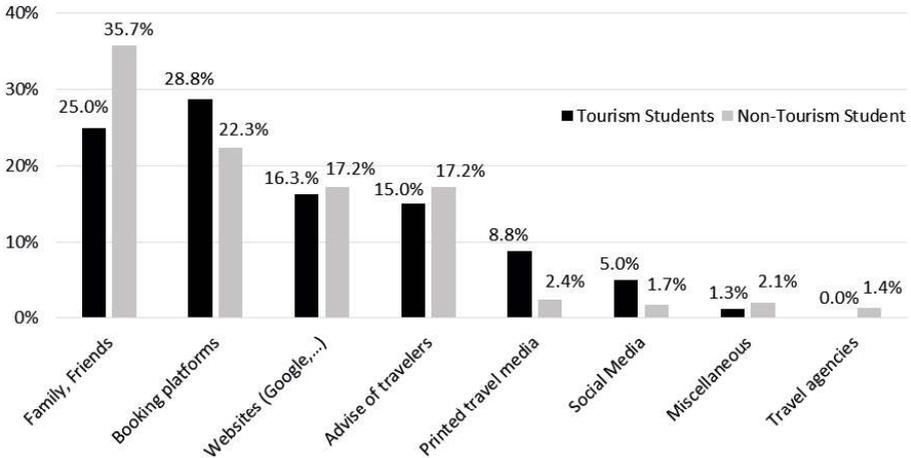
The authors defined travel as a change of one's location, outside of the place one is used to, to reach a single destination or to explore several places (Sölter 2009). The questionnaire was based on this definition. It was mentioned on the survey to guarantee a common understanding of travelling amongst the respondents. 93.8% of them answered that they have done one or more trips during 2016. There was no significant difference between tourism and non-tourism students ($\chi^2(1, n=371)=1.05, p=0.31$). More than 60% of both groups indicated that they travel at least one time during a period of six months. There is no significant difference between tourism and non-tourism students ($\chi^2(1, n=371)=1.49, p=0.18$) but a slight trend can be seen: 68.8% of tourism students agreed on travelling at least once per six months, as compared to 60.5% of the non-tourism students. In terms of organising a travel, 88.1% plan their trips on their own, 11.3% rely partially on travel agencies and only 0.6% have their trip completely set up by an agency. This

fact goes along with increasing independency concerning travel arrangements, based on easy inspiration and information processes via internet and social networking platforms (Kim et al. 2014).

Asked for their reasons for travelling, those respondents who went on at least one trip in 2016 (n=348) stated the following motivations (multiple options possible): culture and sightseeing (61.2%), beach and bathing (56.3%), active travels (49.4%), visiting friends and relatives (46.3%), relaxation (39.1%), visiting events (32.2%), exchange semester/internship (25.3%), wellness (19.8%) and shopping (10.3%). A deeper analysis showed that both groups of students indicated culture and sightseeing as the main reason for travelling. A slight difference can be observed in terms of beach and bathing related holidays. 22.1% of NTS named it as their main reason for travelling in 2016, as compared to 14.3% of TS. The main motivating factors for tourism-students were educational reasons (TS: 20.6% to NTS: 14.4%), active holidays (TS: 20.8% to NTS: 13.7%) and visiting friends and relatives (TS: 10.4% to NTS: 5.9%). Beside going to bathing destinations, relaxing holidays are the most named reasons for travelling amongst non-tourism students (12.9%), as compared to TS (7.8%).

Schmeißer (2010) pointed out the importance of direct exchange processes with friends and relatives in terms of travel planning. Petterson stated in 2007 that mass media, like television and radio, had lost its importance as a source of inspiration (Petterson 2007). The study at hand confirms previous findings and emphasizes the importance of direct conversions (87.9%), recommendations of other travellers (62.4%), internet in general (55.2%), social networking platforms (48.9%) and booking and reviewing platforms (44.1%). Summing up the mentions of travel magazines, television and travel agencies as a source of inspiration, a total percentage of 46.6% is identified.

As shown in Figure 1, for NTS the personal exchange with friends and relatives is the most important source of information (35.7% to TS: 25.0%), whereas TS named booking and reviewing platforms as their most import source (28.8% to NTS: 22.3%). Only 5% of TS and 2% of NTS named social media platforms as relevant in terms of deciding for a destination. Compared with the figures of the sources of inspiration (48.9%), one can assume that social media platforms are important for finding a destination but the quality of information seems to be low. Also, another option seems to be possible. Zhang and Van Alstyne (2004) stated that social media platforms indicate a certain importance



Source: authors' own design

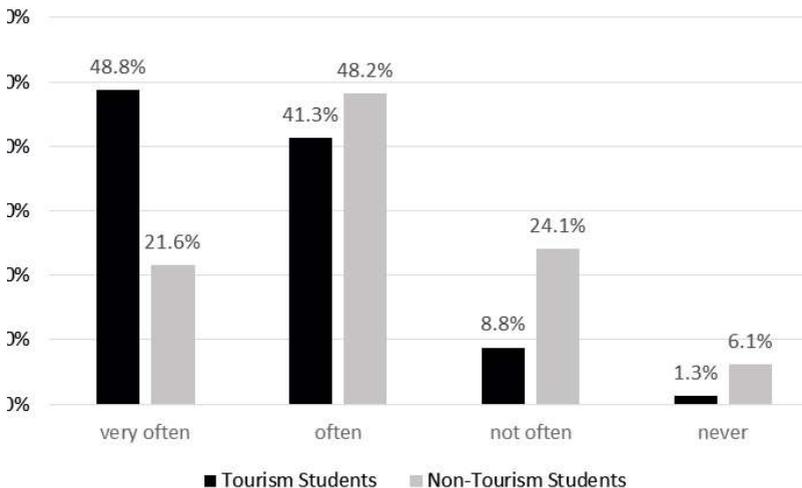
Figure 1. On which source of information is your booking decision based on?

in finding information, but if the search is not successful immediately, people head to other sources. Websites of tourism associations and results of Google search show a certain prominence (TS: 16.3%; NTS: 17.2%). These figures may include some limitations as Google search engines – also guide users to reviewing or booking platforms.

When grouping the students according to their Facebook usage, differences in sources of inspiration can be identified. While *weak Facebook users (WFbU)* prefer personal discussions with friends and other travellers (WFbU: 44.2% to HFbU: 38.0%), *heavy Facebook users (HFbU)* make use of travel platforms, websites and social network to find destinations more often (WFbU: 41.2% to HFbU: 51.7%). In-depth analyses of the decisive roles of destination choices show similar tendencies. Booking platforms were more often mentioned by the HFbU (33.3%) than by the WFbU (22.8%). Also websites of tourism associations, and results of Google search are more important for the decisions making process for the HFbU (21.2%) than for the WFbU (12.0%). 38.0% of the WFbU prefer talking with friends and relatives, as compared to HFbU for whom this source is less important (25.8%).

Influence of Facebook on destination decisions

According to Sparkler (2014) travelling is the most widespread topic on Facebook. The study on hand reveals that 74.3% of the Facebook users (n=358) indicated that they follow travel related postings very or quite often, 20.7% don't follow such postings very often, and 5.0% don't follow travel related content on Facebook. If tourism students and non-tourism students are to be compared, a clear difference appears: 48.8% of TS followed travel related Facebook postings very often, but only 21.6% of NTS have followed this type of posts. If we compare the answers given for the option *not very often* we see that 24.1% of NTS chose it, whereas only 8.8% of TS ticked it. The correlation of both variables *Recognition on Facebook* and *Study Program* is, according to Spearman, two-tailed significant ($r(356)=0.27, p<0.01$). This correlation could be based on the fact that TS have more friends on social media who are interested in tourism so they get in contact with travel-related content more often than NTS. As we know from Sparkler (2014. 6) that 42% of all Facebook users share travel experiences with friends, this effect might be intensified.



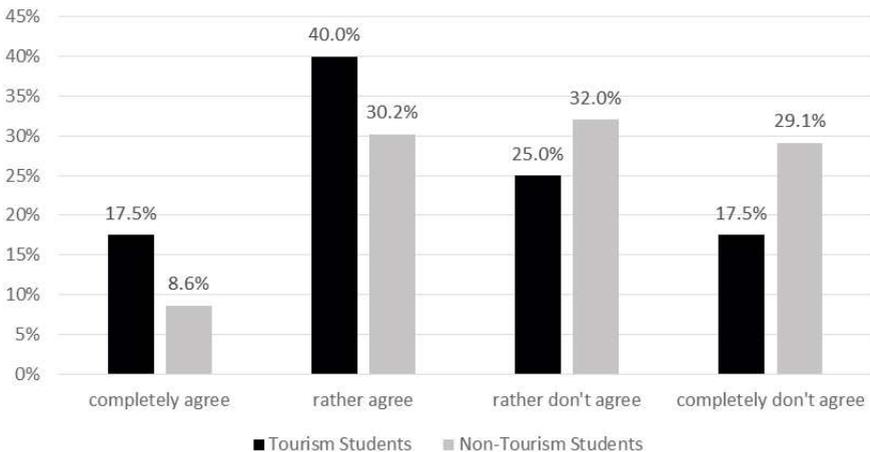
Source: authors' own design

Figure 2. How often do you follow travel related content on Facebook?

17.5% of the TS fully agreed with the sentence *I like to share postings of my travel experiences*, whereas only 8.6% amongst NTS totally agreed. *I rather agree*

was chosen by 40% of the TS and 30.2% of the NTS. The answering possibilities *I rather don't agree* (TS: 25% to NTS: 32%) and *I fully don't agree* (TS: 17.5% to NTS: 29.1%) were somewhat significant according to the chi-square test ($\chi^2(3, n=358)=10.6, p=0.01$). There is no significant correlation between the variables *Like to share travel experiences on Facebook* and the *Facebook Usage*. But we see a huge difference within the answering possibility *I rather agree*, when we compare HFbU (42.4%) and WFbU (22.8%). There is also no significance between the variables *Facebook Usage* and *Recognition of Travel postings on Facebook*. If the respondents indicate to share travel experiences on Facebook, the majority does it in form of pictures (86%).

Although there is a difference in terms of sharing posts on Facebook between TS and NTS (see Figure 3), there is no significant correlation regarding the variable *Evaluation and recommendation of destinations on Facebook*. Only 20.1% of the Facebook users mentioned to have already rated or recommended a destination on Facebook. The study shows that the higher the usage of Facebook is, the more often users have already rated destinations (HFbU: 24.2% to WFbU: 15.2%).



Source: authors' own design

Figure 3. I'd like to share postings about my travels on Facebook

Similar results can be shown for the question: *Did you ever visit a destination, because it was recommended on Facebook (Answers: yes/no)?* 20.4% answered

yes, they did (TS: 28.1% to NTS: 18.2%), whereas 79.6% have not yet done it. HFbU choose twice as often a destination because it was recommended on Facebook (34.6% to WFbU: 17.4%). Independently of the study program, the authors found a significant correlation between *Facebook usage* and *destination choices* ($\text{Chi}^2(2, n=358)=10.4, p=0.005$).

Discussion

Before the internet appeared, social discussions and travel reports have been crucial for choosing a product or a destination (Bone 1995; Capella–Greco 1989; Gitelson–Crompto 1983). According to the research on hand, these sources of information are still relevant. Those respondents, who have done at least one trip in 2016 have indicated that their most important sources of inspiration have been personal discussions with friends and relatives. Internet and social networks are supplemented to the former types of inspiration. Many students use the current possibilities of the web and especially of the social network system (SNS) to get in contact with other travellers and share information (Xiang–Gretzel 2010). Amongst students of tourism related degree programs booking and reviewing platforms are the most important sources of information in terms of booking travels. This study identified the differences between the SNS, like Facebook, and travel or booking platforms, like TripAdvisor or Booking.com. By doing this, it was possible to state that Facebook plays a minor role in travel decisions but people like to use it as a source of inspiration. On the other hand, booking and reviewing platforms are not very popular as sources of inspiration but play, after personal discussions, the second most important role as source of information for booking decisions. Disregarding the type of study programs within the sample, it was shown that the more often people use Facebook, the more relevant internet-related sources of inspiration and information become.

The results reveal that tourism students follow the topics *Travel* and *Holidays* on Facebook significantly more often than students of non-tourism programs. Postings on Facebook, which include pictures, become more and more important. 52.1% of the respondents named pictures as the most followed postings. 57.8% of the TS like to share postings with pictures about travel experiences on Facebook, which itself can be an indicator that pictures are very widely followed.

An existing influence of Facebook on destination decisions amongst students can be confirmed by the study on hand. The possibility that a student

visits a destination because it was recommended by a friend on Facebook rises significantly with the intensity of the person's Facebook use. More than this, tourism students indicated to have visited a destination because of a Facebook recommendation more often. The assumption that TS are more familiar with the topics of travelling and tourism than NTS, and so they get more often in contact with these topics also on Facebook, can be verified. Taking into consideration the influence of user generated content on Facebook on the choice of a travel destination amongst all relevant factors which can have influence on destination choices, UCG has little influence. The decision to visit a destination is affected by individual interests, the image and reputation of a destination, available packages and the travel motivations in general. Facebook and social networking systems can have influence to a certain extent, as they offer exchange possibilities of travel experiences, but finally a combination of travel motivations and sources of information will lead to the decision to travel to a certain destination.

Conclusion

The influence of user generated content on Facebook in relation to the choice of destination amongst students was stated. Slight differences between tourism and non-tourism students were found, although the most significant distinctions could be proven in relation to the intensity of Facebook usage, regardless of the kind of study program. It was proven that shared pictures of travel experiences tend to become a source of inspiration for other people.

The study was conducted amongst students in Austria, by using a fully standardized online questionnaire. In total, 371 questionnaires were fully answered and useable. The group of answering tourism students (n=80) is much smaller than the ones of non-tourism students (n=291). Due to organizational reasons and resource limitations, it was not the aim of the authors to get fully representative results concerning the population of students in Austria. To reach a higher level of representativeness, the questionnaire was sent to all academic tourism programs in Austria. Due to reasons of anonymity it was not possible to draw any conclusions regarding the home-based university of the respondents. Taking into account that two of the three authors work or study at the FH JOANNEUM, it is assumed that the response rate amongst students of this university was higher. Further research should focus on gaining fully representative results for Austrian students in general. To be more specific, in terms of data analysis, a separate view

on male and female results could generate more knowledge about the topics. The study on hand did not analyse the data in terms of gender-related differences, as the research questions did not ask for gender-specific answers. In terms of target group oriented marketing or communication strategies for tourism companies or destination management organizations (DMOs), a view on gender-related results could develop new knowledge.

The authors see huge potential for DMOs to encourage their guests to post pictures and videos during their stay, but also to evaluate it when they are back home. Reward systems or other benefits for coming-back guests could be helpful.

For practical application more research is needed in terms of UGC and its implications on destination choosing. For example, a research topic of interest could be to examine the relations of the DMO's published media (pictures, videos, stories, etc.) and their impact on the guests' expectations before they arrive. Moreover, the question if it is possible to guide guests in a certain destination via UGC to an intended behaviour (visiting attractions, eat at local restaurants, etc.) might be of interest for DMOs and tourism entrepreneurs. Finally, UGC could be of help to develop a gentle usage of resources within a destination, which should be an intrinsic motivation for every DMO.

For Facebook itself, the knowledge about the impact of booking and reviewing portals in terms of sources of inspiration and information, shows potentials for further development. Right now it is possible to evaluate destinations or hotels, but the importance of Facebook as a travel influencing platform could be much higher. The authors suggest providing integrated linking possibilities from sources of inspiration (UGC pictures, videos, etc.) with sources of information (booking and reviewing platforms, etc.). These linkages could lead to a much higher impact for Facebook to become not only a place of inspiration, but also a place for information.

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