



Investigating the effects of social networks on increasing student exchanges and short academic courses

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Abstract

Social media, as one of most powerful online networking tools, has been integrated into a part of social and economic life in the real world. It refers to an entire online environment built on people's contributions and interactions. Social media has the potentials of influencing decision-making in a very short time regardless of the distance. This study is carried out in order to highlight the potentials of social media in the educational tourism setting by collaborative learning and improve the students' academic performance. In this study role of social media in educational tourism is researched. The study investigates the role of social media in developing tourism education. More particularly, this article examines the opportunities that online users' social interaction can provide for the development of tourism education.

Keywords: Educational Tourism; Social Media; Interaction

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Introduction Educational Tourism and Social Media Interactions

Tourism is an important source of revenue to many destinations, but budget cuts and changes in use of media and technology requires changes in destinations' communications strategy and the way they promote themselves in the global market. Implementation of new media and technologies are crucial for survival. New media provides a less expensive approach to marketing for destinations and offers many opportunities for visitors' involvement in attracting potential visitors to destinations.

The expansion of online communities has persuaded many individuals to become more active on the Internet, forming and maintaining social relationships. They are not passive users searching only for information, but they are also active users

who generate content to participate in debates. Networking is now a common strategy among individuals to share experiences and to educate each other. They join online communities or social networking sites, with a view to generate useful content. Social media plays a significant role in many aspects of tourism, especially in information search and decision-making behaviours, tourism promotion. "It is now more than 40 years since tourism first appeared as a distinct area of study. Arguably its history goes back far longer than this in that the study of some of its component sectors, notably hotel operations and catering, or component activities such as leisure and recreation can trace their origins to before World War II. Also those specialising in academic disciplines, notably geographers and economists have paid attention to the role of tourism in, for example, regional studies or foreign trade studies over an even longer period.

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It really awaited the 1960s and a number of key changes in tourism, in higher education and in society more generally for tourism to emerge both as a clear area of study in its own right and as a subject for study up to diploma and degree level and for research. The difference between the changes brought by the 1960s and what had happened previously is that the basis was established for a new and fairly discrete subject and an associated community of scholars. One outcome of this change has been a fairly phenomenal rate of growth. In the UK for example, from about 20 students of tourism in higher education in 1972 the figure had reached more than 4,000 new student enrolments each year by the end of the century (Airey, 2002). There are also many tens of thousands of such students in the UK in further, technical and school education (Airey and Johnson, 1999).” This brief background suggests one, rather confident, level of a complex picture in which there has been a recognition and demand for tourism education with a corresponding expansion in students, in scholars and in research and publications. All this suggests a relatively easy and confident process in which growth has provided tourism education with its own rationale and justification.

Review of Literature

Two major concepts of educational tourism and tourism education are used in international literature. The usage of these concepts is still a subject of scientific discussions as in general there are no major differences between them, and they have a similar or even the same meaning. The first definitions of educational tourism referred to adults’ continuous studies, sightseeing travel or cultural tourism (Kalinowski, 1992; Wood, 2001). Later, however, the notion underwent transformation and the emphasis was put on the aspect of education. Ritchie (2003) analyses this problem in two different aspects: in the first case, tourism being the main focus (tourism first), and in the second case, education being the main focus (education first). He attributes trips and excursions with a major focus on tourism itself and on the way of travelling to the case where the area of tourism is dominant. However, Ritchie does not deny the fact that while travelling this way, a person can also learn a lot of important things. He tends to apply this reasoning to tourism education. Ritchie indicates that in the case of educational tourism the main focus falls on education. He attributes school excursions, foreign language learning, exchange programs, i.e. all activities related to the process of education, to educational tourism. Those who take part in educational tourism are motivated to gain specific knowledge or skills. However, this theory formulated by Ritchie is debatable and the author’s definitions of the two concepts overlap each other.

With a need for more comprehensive scientific reasoning, it can be stated that the notion of tourism education defines how to teach tourism, which methods to apply, etc.; while educational tourism refers to educational activity implemented through tourism. Educational tourism combines the two areas of activity, i.e. tourism and education. Educational tourism is an educational activity implemented during excursions or trips which facilitates gaining knowledge and competences through practice. The model of the structure of the educational tourism concept identifies three main components: the science of tourism, the science of education, and the factors of the external environment. Social media influences tourism development (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) by mediating tourism experiences (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009) or facilitating share of information among individuals. This sharing climate facilitated by social media may be employed to develop tourism education (Inui, Wheeler, & Lankford, 2006). Therefore, developing tourism education through elearning strategies can be a strategic plan for this sector. Previous research in e-learning emphasizes the role of interaction, suggesting that this is a key issue for success in a system. When individuals are able to participate in the learning process, they learn better (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). In this research, social learning intention is shaped by the theory of social support that people interact on the Internet to support each other and that these social interconnectivities have new opportunities, in that individuals can create value for education. Social support in an online context is the main foundation of the research. Research shows that social interactions are confirmed to have an important influence on collaborative learning (Huang, Yang, Yueh-Min, & Hsiao, 2010). In collaborative learning, knowledge seems to emanate from and become the possession of the community (Huang et al., 2010)

The number of online communities is increasing. And the growing popularity of social media is shaping a more supportive learning environment for individuals to decide if they wish to learn online, share their experiences and knowledge with others and access the latest information for their particular educational needs. Social media can attract individuals to gain knowledge via social learning. With the introduction of these perspectives, social support is likely to be facilitated in this supportive climate. Social media is an influential tool in preserving learning through online communities. Research has shown that social contact and exchange can initiate new social skills and enhance the problem-solving process through sharing support and further cultivate innovative thinking (Huang et al., 2010). Problem solving, social interaction, information sharing,

advice seeking and supporting other users are now possible in online communities. Individuals are more prone to share knowledge with others in a system when they have positive attitudes on knowledge sharing and when they consider that it would be an advantage for others (Huang et al., 2010). In fact, the emergence of social media has made learning in this way so much easier. Hence, the result is social learning, where individuals learn through social interactions in an online context through others. Individuals join online communities and share their knowledge and experiences with other peers. They interact with others to seek advice and solve their problems by providing social support. These interconnectivities provide online social support. The social interaction of individuals is a source of both emotional and informational support for other users in groups and communities in an online context. Therefore, these social platforms can be a good source for supporting individuals looking for information and advice in the area of tourism education. Tourism education is apparently one of the main sub sectors of the multisectoral tourism world and one whose manifestation could impact on the whole of tourism's society, directly or indirectly. Tribe (1999) defines tourism's society as encompassing not only tourists but all those impacted upon by tourism, and, the tourism world as comprising three main domains, namely: the domains of the tourists, the business and non-business environment. Tourism higher education (THE) has been singled out by the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) as holding a potential to achieve customer satisfaction and also improve the competitiveness of tourism businesses and regions if specific education and training are guaranteed (WTO 1997). Bergsma (2000) writing from the tourism and hospitality industry perspective notes that the average age of people seeking employment is increasing, and that more people are in education and training, necessitating tourism operators to follow the same trend when recruiting and investing in human capital. She adds that in the new millennium, it is the latter, not capital assets that will make the difference (2000). These not only reflect the potential role tourism education can play within the tourism sector but also points to the enormous task that it ought to pursue in order to produce human resources capable of steering the sector through the present, into the future. Further still, WTO (1997) reiterates the need to not only direct specific efforts at training and education but also to match the curriculum design as well as the contents of the teaching programs to demand. In other words, these should address the needs of the employers, the recipients of education as well as the providers of education (Ibid). The provision of tourism education poses a very fundamental

challenge to the educators in that the different stakeholders have specific tourism education needs they deem appropriate for their own purposes. This in principle should be reflected in the form of tourism higher education offered by different institutions, something that does not seem to happen in practice. Lewis (2002) writes about how [tourism higher education] programs developed in North America and the UK tend to be dominated by economic models and vocational ethos "that attach minimal emphasis on a critical assessment of the broader implications of [the] tourism [phenomenon]." Likewise Craig-Smith (1995) indicates how the tourism industry and other stakeholders like the WTO and International Labour Organisation (ILO) argue that the prevailing education (in Asia pacific) leaves a gap between student output and industry needs. Moreover it is said that there is apparent incompatibility between the skilled labour supply from training organisations and the demand from the industry (WTO 1997). Although the industry - taken here to mean the domain of business within the tourism world (Tribe 1999) - appears to be the most predominant employer within the tourism sector, it certainly isn't the only one that has training and education needs that ought to be addressed. The non-business domain that entails inter alia the public sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local communities and even tourism academics have demands that ought to be catered for by tourism education and training. The latter's stakeholder demands are imperatives that derive from the fact that tourism has multiple impacts on society. In this regard Lewis (2002) has noted that; "...where social phenomenon are considered, the tourism programs are generally limited to elucidating those human resource factors that contribute to maintaining a stable workforce" (2002).

The shape of tourism developed as a field of study started off with a clear vocational shape which attracted students and universities which in turn provided opportunities for academics to offer a range of related courses. The boom in tourism education came decades after the birth of mass tourism and the rapidly increasing demand for workers in the tourism industry during the decades following the Second World War (Fayos-Solá, 1997). The same expansion in tourism education can also be seen at an international level (Stergiou, et al., 2003). During the last three decades, there has been a steady increase in the number of universities offering tourism and/or hospitality degree programs, especially after the 1980s (Jafari, 1997; Tribe, 2006). Many countries offered higher education degrees in tourism at both undergraduate and graduate levels; and master-level degrees and doctoral programs in other

disciplines have expanded to include tourism as an area of study (Jafari, 1990).

Social media can be used as an effective tool to help increase collaboration, communication, and cooperation skills in students. Social media can provide a way for teachers and students to become more interactive. Students have the chance to develop intercultural awareness, and the opportunity to connect with peers all over the world will allow students to build tolerance and develop attitudes, knowledge, concepts, and skills as they learn about their own and others' social, national, and ethnic cultures (IBO, 2008).

Social media allows education to be more open. It not only promotes open communication between students and teachers, but also between teachers and administrators, teachers and parents, and amongst educators (Couros, 2011).

The use of social media in education supports sociological constructivism, which claims that social interactions, combined with learner experiences, help to construct new knowledge (Young, 2008). Through social networking, microblogging, and backchannel forums, students are able to provide feedback on course content and lectures, and they can build on their own understandings through their peers' comments and questions.

Social media also enhances cognitive flexibility, a component of a constructivist learning environment (CLE). Since students are able to connect with peers in their classes as well as within and beyond their communities, they will be exposed to various perspectives on issues (Jonassen, 1999). Another essential part of CLEs are "rich sources of information" that should be "learnerselected" and "just-in-time" (Jonassen, 1999).

The students participate these seminars via social media networking which can provide learners opportunities to explore, experience and engage with subject material and to make connections between theory and practice. They can develop a variety of learning and transferable skills including research, critical analysis, group discussion and reflective practice and can also be designed to develop skills in presentation, leadership and group work. Such seminars are used in conjunction with other methods to support diverse opportunities for students to explore experience and engage with material. They provide scope to develop academic and transferable skills and for formative feedback. In theory seminars should turn the focus of learning away from the lecturer and enable students to develop confidence in their own ability through reflecting upon theory and case studies and engaging in discussions with their peers.

Conclusion

Social media in the educational tourism field is a creative way to allow the people to give ideas. The main value derived from these social platforms is social learning, where users learn while interacting with other users (Hajli, Bugshan, Lin, & Featherman, 2013). Social media users' interactions have generated a new stream in e-learning, which is called social learning. Social learning is defined as the use of social media in an e-learning environment, where individuals can interact and co-create content on the internet (Hajli et al., 2013). It is argued that social learning to sustainable development may address issues in the tourism industry (Koutsouris, 2009). This is creating a new development in the area of e-learning. Social media has facilitated the creation of online communities, where individuals join, share their information and experiences, access others' information and participate in different online debates. These advancements are helping individuals to get the advice and information they need. In the case of tourism, which is the focus of this research, individuals go online, search for advice, or join online communities and thus get the information they need. Therefore, these users are likely to obtain their educational needs in order to develop their skills and use them for personal and organizational development. This helps to free up time for professionals and also helps to reduce costs. Toward these ends, this research investigates the role of social media for education in the tourism industry and how knowledge is managed through online communities and social networking sites (SNSs). Tourism educational boards can develop online communities and encourage individuals to participate in these social platforms to share their information and experiences with others. Universities should be preparing students for employment in an industry with the forms of education most appropriate for those seeking employment in tourism. Therefore, tourism education is directed to preparation for employment in the tourism industry. Generally, the industry seeks personal skills such as communication, adaptability, and leadership (Martin and McEvoy, 2003) and foreign language ability (Leslie, et al., 2004). Industry professionals are much satisfied with communication as fundamental knowledge influencing work, and also they are satisfied with graduates' English conversation. Conversation skills and foreign languages are scaled at very important value by tourism industry professionals. So, graduates' conversation skills are still important and should be provided in high quality and standard of teaching and learning to match industry need. The content of tourism course in each university is quietly different and has diversity of course description

and subjects. It is hardly difficult to compare tourism educators' satisfaction with the quality of tourism course among universities because strength and weakness of each university's tourism course are different. However, the quality of tourism course can display through its output (graduates) who have got qualification and skills matching needs of the industry.

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