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A AN OVERVIEW ON USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ONLINE TRAVELLERS



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ABSTRACT

The World Wide Web has empowered travellers, enabling them to exchange opinions or experiences with others, and consequently, influencing their travel decisions. For example, user-generated content (UGC) is allowing Internet users to make comments and reviews in a large variety of forms such as photos, videos, podcasts, ratings, reviews, articles and blogs. The empowerment provided by these UGC tools has changed the dynamics of the travel industry. This paper presents an overview of some important concepts of UGC and the empowerment of travellers on the World Wide Web.

Keywords: User-Generated Content (UGC). Online travellers. Internet. Empowerment.

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UMA VISÃO GERAL SOBRE O CONTEÚDO GERADO PELO USUÁRIO NA INTERNET E O EMPOWERMENT DOS VIAJANTES ONLINE

RESUMO

A World Wide Web tem possibilitado que os viajantes troquem opiniões e experiências entre si, e conseqüentemente, isso tem influenciado as decisões de viagem de cada um deles. Como exemplo disso, o Conteúdo Gerado pelo Usuário (UGC) na Internet está possibilitando que os internautas façam comentários online de várias formas, tais como: fotos, vídeos, podcasts, avaliações, artigos e blogs. O empowerment dos viajantes através do uso dessas ferramentas de UGC tem alterado a dinâmica da indústria de viagem. Este artigo apresenta uma visão sobre alguns dos principais conceitos de UGC e do empowerment dos viajantes na World Wide Web.

Palavras-chave: Conteúdo Gerado pelo Usuário (UGC). Viajantes Online. Internet. Empowerme.

1 INTRODUCTION

During the last few years, users have spent more time on the web and shared more information with each other (ENDERS et al., 2008). In fact, people are making their thoughts and opinions easily available to other through the Internet (DELLAROCAS, 2003). Also, new forms of content generation, communication and collaboration have emerged on the web (KOLBITSCH; MAURER, 2006). For instance, user-generated content (UGC) allows Internet users to make comments in a large variety of forms such as photos, videos, podcasts, ratings, reviews, articles and blogs (GEORGE; SCERRI; 2007; GRETZEL; YOO, 2008). Roughly 75.2 million Internet users use UGC in the United States, but this figure is expected to increase up to 101 million in 2011 (MARKETER, 2007). In 2007 approximately 60% of European online users used UGC (CARRERA et al., 2008).

Examples of UGC activities that people are using on the web include: reading or writing blogs, reading or writing customer reviews, taking part in social networking sites, listening to podcasts and setting up RSS feeds (CARRERA et al., 2008). Unlike the early days of Internet when the websites only broadcasted one-way information, this new Internet trend is empowering the users to create, edit and view information (CARRERA et al., 2008; O'REILLY, 2005). Empowerment is an enabling process, which implies "creating conditions for heightening motivation for task accomplishment through the development of a strong sense of personal efficacy" (CONGER; KANUNGO, 1988, p. 474).

When people use the Internet to obtain travel information, they do research about the trip on the Internet, read and generate content and reviews, and interact with other travellers in social networks (ARSAL; BACKMAN; BALDWIN, 2008). This is empowering tourists by giving them the opportunity to receive and pass on recommendations of their travel experiences (SCHEGG et al., 2008).

2 USER-GENERATED CONTENT (UGC)

Increasingly people are expressing their views, chatting, making friends, exchanging ideas, sharing information, and keeping diaries or blogs online (CHUNG; BUHALIS, 2008; LIN, 2006). In addition, consumers are using the Internet to share their personal experiences and opinions with other consumers (HENNIG-THURAU; WALSH, 2003). The expansion of the Internet has increased consumers' ability to post comments on the web (PARK; LEE, 2008), and meeting customers' expectation has become more important than ever (O'CONNOR, 2008). In fact, an online consumer review refers to his/her experiences, evalua-

tions and opinions about products purchased and used by him/her (PARK; LEE; HAN, 2007).

The use of social networking sites, consumer generated content and web applications by the Internet users have increased recently (SIGALA, 2007b). They are considered tools of mass collaboration because the users feel empowered by these technologies to participate and collaborate with other users producing and consuming the information through the Internet (SIGALA, 2007b). This is changing the way consumers use the World Wide Web since they are creating and distributing content on the Internet (DEARSTYNE, 2007; LABOY; TORCHIO, 2007).

User-generated content (UGC), also known as consumer-generated content (CGC), constitutes the inputs provided by Internet users on the web such as peer reviews, referrals, blogs, social networks and online forums (CONSTANTINIDES, 2007). In all these UGC activities, the user is the central point being not only consumer, but also content contributor (CONSTANTINIDES, 2007). As a result, people are gaining unprecedented power on the web (GEORGE; SCERRI, 2007). The reasons why individuals generate content on the Internet are (GEORGE; SCERRI, 2007): analysis and commentary, entertainment, and criticism and review (e.g. books, products, travellers' comments on hotels).

Two of the main forms of UGC used by consumers on the web are reviews and ratings (GRETZEL; YOO, 2008). Indeed, online reviews are having an important role when consumers make purchasing decisions on the Internet (GRETZEL; YOO, 2008). As informants, web consumers are requesting product information as well as providing recommendation information at the same time, which includes their experiences, evaluations, and opinions (PARK; LEE; HAN, 2008). Accordingly, this is a new kind of word-of-mouth communication (PARK; LEE; HAN, 2007).

Internet users are generating content and communicating to each other using Web 2.0 tools. Web 2.0 refers to a second generation of web-based services such as social networking sites, blogging, podcasting, and wikis that enable users to collaborate and share information online emphasizing UGC (LEFEBVRE, 2007; O'REILLY, 2005; REACTIVE, 2007). Web 2.0 tools allow the generation, dissemination, sharing and editing of informational content, which enables a creation of informal user' networks and consequently helps the flow of ideas and knowledge among the Internet users (CONSTANTINIDES, 2007). Thus, Web 2.0 serves as a forum for people to pass information to others, inviting site visitors to comment, collaborate, and edit information through web tools (OBERHELMAN, 2007).

Web 2.0 tools provide a great opportunity for customers to personalize their information (CARKEEK, 2008), enabling a host of new services and possibilities on the Internet (GEORGE; SCERRI, 2007) such as blogs (online journals or personal websites), podcasts (audio recordings), videos (e.g., YouTube), wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), online social networks (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Hi5, and Bebo), and users' comments and reviews (word-of-mouth opinions) (CARRERA et al., 2008; HOEGG et al., 2006). Basically, the Web 2.0 based services consist of three components (HOEGG et al., 2006):

- Content and services for collaborative creating, management, updating and sharing of content (text, videos, photos or links);
- Services and automatic update procedures which allow users to input and create a new state of knowledge and content;
- Trust building services as ratings, voting and similar.

3 UGC IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

The Internet in the tourism, travel and hospitality industries is not only part of the mainstream industry management and marketing, but also has changed markets structures, practices, communication and distribution channels (KOU-MELIS, 2008). Increasingly travel organizations have adopted the Internet in their businesses (DOOLIN; BURGESS; COOPER, 2002). More and more tourists are going online and the hospitality and tourism industry must be aware that their consumers are being influenced by the travel sites related to the selling or discussion of tourists' trips (LITVIN; GOLDSMITH; PAN, 2008). Travellers are engaging in online travel communities since they can share knowledge with each other from a previous trip (ARSAL; BACKMAN; BALDWIN, 2008). In an online community, tourists obtain travel content, seek suggestions and have fun regarding experiences of trips (STOCKDALE; BOROVICKA, 2006).

Rezabakhsh et al. (2006) suggest that Internet encourages consumers to engage in an information search in the pre-purchase phase. More and more tourists have used Internet as the key source of information for planning a trip (CAI; FENG; BREITER, 2004). Gretzel and Yoo (2008) cite that online consumer-generated information is playing an increasing role in traveller decision-making. Also, Chung and Buhalis (2008) found tourism information sources was a main factor influencing destination choice to potential tourists on the Web 2.0. Sigala (2007a) highlights that information generated by tourists is causing a tremendous impact on decision making behaviour of web users.

When tourists are searching for information for decision-making on the web, they are also enjoying this process by interacting with others chatting and viewing pictures (CHUNG; BUHALIS, 2008). Travel reviews not only provide ideas to tourists, but also add fun to the planning trip process (GRETZEL; YOO, 2008). Given the growth of Web 2.0 and dissemination of social media and User Generated Content (reviews, ratings, photos, and videos), the travel consumer decisions are clearly being affected by these new concepts (O'CONNOR, 2008). Web applications such as message boards, chat rooms, blogs and virtual brand communities are important venues for consumer-generated media (DWYER, 2007), and bring fun and entertainment for Internet users as well (HSU; LIN, 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; WERTHNER, 2006). A web-based survey carried out by Gretzel and Yoo (2008) showed that 97.7% of Internet users who travel said they read other travellers' reviews during the process of planning a trip. O'Mahony (2008) highlights that in November 2007, Sunday Times Top 100 travel sites was dominated by travel reviews and blogs, where web users can share their experiences and book directly. Examples of websites that help tourists to interact and offer peer to peer advice on the Internet are TripAdvisor.com, IgoUgo.com, WAYN.com, Virtualtourist.com, Trekshare.com, and Lonelyplanet.com (CHUNG; BUHALIS, 2008). Approximately 20 million travellers planned trips through TripAdvisor by September 2007 (SCHEGG et al., 2008). TripAdvisor supports people on the pre-travel phase (researching and bookings) as well as on the post-travel phase, shares experiences, reviews hotels and destinations, posts photos and videos from their trips (CHUNG; BUHALIS, 2008). This is causing an enormous change in tourist's behaviour and to the way users seek, evaluate, buy and consume products and services on the web (SIGALA, 2007a).

4 EMPOWERMENT ON THE INTERNET

Various definitions of empowerment exist in literature (PERKINS; ZIMMERMAN, 1995) and no consensus occurs regarding this concept (ERGENELI; ARL; METIN, 2007). For the purpose of this paper, empowerment is defined as a motivational construct and is viewed as an enabling process (CONGER; KANUNGO, 1988). According to Conger and Kanungo (1988, p. 474), "enabling implies creating conditions for heightening motivation for task accomplishment through

the development of a strong sense of personal efficacy". In order to understand empowerment in motivational terms, Bandura (1986) defines it as a process whereby an individual's belief in his self-efficacy is enhanced.

Increasingly technologies have been enabling consumers to learn more about the experiences of other consumers (NEWHOLM; LAING; HOGG, 2006; WATHIEU et al., 2002). With the advent of the Internet, the power of the online consumer has risen (KUCIK; KRISHNAMURTHY, 2007). The World Wide Web has empowered consumers allowing them to exchange opinions or experiences with others from all over the world (LITVIN; GOLDSMITH; PAN, 2008), and consequently enabling electronic word-of-mouth communication through bulletin boards and news groups (NIININEN; BUHALIS; MARCH, 2007). For instance, consumers are engaging in electronic word-of-mouth websites (e.g., eopinion.com, consumerreview.com, ciao.com) in order to share opinions and experiences about products and services in general (REZABAKHSH et al., 2006).

Since the explosion of the Internet and emergence of UGC, consumers have been more demanding (VERIKIOS, 2007). Constantinides (2007) states that UGC applications have contributed to an increasing consumer empowerment. Therefore, consumers that use these applications do not depend on website owners to publish the information they look for, but they just rely on information provided by their own peers (O'CONNOR, 2008). Besides, through Web 2.0 tools, users not only have a sense of empowerment, but also feel part of a community (BARKSKY; PURDON, 2006).

Before the Internet, inexperienced consumers received little knowledge from experienced buyers. However, since the World Wide Web went into action the quantity of information available for the consumer has increased considerably (REZABAKHSH et al., 2006). As a consequence of this, more and more consumers have been empowered by greater information (FREEDMAN, 2007), mainly through online communities (KUCIK; KRISHNAMURTHY, 2007). In particular, information ubiquity is part of the Internet (REZABAKHSH et al., 2006).

Information about other consumers has influenced the subjective aspect of empowerment (WATHIEU et al., 2002). The informational empowerment of consumers through the Internet have raised questions about the roles of consumers in the service encounter (LAING et al., 2002). Internet users have shared with others their feedback about products/services creating a considerable flow of electronic word-of-mouth (SIGALA, 2007a). Thus, this huge amount of information through UGC has empowered the consumers (SIGALA, 2007a), affecting how they create, exchange and use information (O'CONNOR, 2008).

5 UGC EMPOWERS ONLINE TRAVELLERS

The Internet is enabling consumers to share their experiences with others (O'CONNOR, 2008). Reading others' opinions about a product is helping consumers make better decisions (HENNIG-THURAU; WALSH, 2003). Many travellers like to share their travel experiences and recommendations with others on the web (BUHALIS; LAW, 2008). Reading the thoughts and recommendations of others using UGC applications assist to facilitate tourists make decisions in regard to their destinations of interest (LABOY; TORCHIO, 2007). For instance, UGC activities such as blogging have transformed the way travellers buy online (BRUSHA, 2008). Koumelis (2008) suggests that tourism organizations and destinations need to adapt to the user-generated content revolution in order to meet the customers' expectations. Starkov and Price (2007) also suggest that hoteliers adopt UGC initiatives allowing tourists to share customer reviews and experiences.

Consumers feel empowered accessing information and taking independent voluntary action in their own behalf (FREEDMAN, 2007). According to Berman and Phillips (2001, p. 183), "the informational aspect of empowerment concerns the extent to which information contributes to enabling people, as citizens, to develop their full potential". Information is essential for travellers, and the Internet allows them to search for travel-related information (air-ticket bookings, online room reservations, etc) without using travel agencies to undertake this (BUHALIS; LAW, 2008; PAN; MACLAURIN; CROTTIS, 2007; REZABAKHSH et al., 2006). Since the travel and tourism industry is an information-oriented business, the Internet is a suitable environment for building a dynamic platform for information supply and exchange (HO; LEE, 2007). As evidence of this, travellers are becoming the co-producers and co-distributors of tourism services using UGC activities such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, and map mashups to share their travel experiences with others (SIGALA, 2007b).

User-generated content is changing the dynamics of the travel industry profoundly using its global word-of-mouth forces (ARSAL; BACKMAN; BALDWIN, 2008; LABOY; TORCHIO, 2007). Travellers are getting in touch directly with other travellers who have similar destination interests through social networking in the online travel world (LABOY; TORCHIO, 2007). Gretzel and Yoo (2008) assert that consumer-generated content such as online travel reviews written by tourists on virtual communities are more available and used frequently to transmit travel-related decisions. Indeed, consumer-generated content facilitates tourists to evaluate travel alternatives during decision-making processes on the Internet

(O'CONNOR, 2008). Hence, the content generated by the Internet users is empowering online travellers in the planning and buying processes of their trips (SCHEGG et al., 2008; SIGALA, 2007a).

Consumer empowerment has been related to changes in the travel and entertainment industries (FREEDMAN, 2007). For example, before booking trips, 61% of travellers consult online search engines (CONRADY, 2007). As a consequence, tourists are becoming empowered. Hjalager (2001, p. 289) points out that "a truly empowered tourist is a person who, without much pain or intellectual effort, is able to make an informed choice of services and products in accordance with his/her own preferences". Indeed, the Internet enables tourists to receive and pass on recommendations of tourist experiences (HJALAGER, 2001).

When web users are searching for travel-related information, reading reviews and associating with others in social networks, they are generating valuable information on the tourism industry (LABOY; TORCHIO, 2007). Increasingly travellers are taking advantage of such content (GRETZEL; YOO, 2008). Therefore, since information is the lifeblood of tourism, UGC is having a significant impact on this industry where travellers are empowered to create and distribute their own content (SIGALA, 2007b).

6 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to provide an overview of some important concepts of UGC and the empowerment of travellers on the World Wide Web. There is a need to raise the awareness of UGC tools and the possibilities they offer to the tourism industry. Since there is 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 travellers.

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