Seniors and Tourism: An International Exploratory Study on the Use of the Internet for Researching Recreational Information

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to analyse the experience of seniors navigating the Web for information on vacation travel by studying the sources of information and the means they use while researching and planning their vacation. Our international exploratory analysis is based on semi-directed interviews held with 22 French and Canadian seniors who used the Internet to research their tourism destinations. On the theoretical side, the research pointed out 4 different senior internet users: senior-Altruist, senior-Opportunist, senior-Disinclined and senior-Web2.0. It also shows that social interactions help improve the pertinence and the specific information sought. On the management side, our results help clarify the best communication strategies for the tourism industry insofar as using particular tools adapted for seniors and the Internet.

Keywords: seniors, Web 2.0, Internet, tourism, researching information

1. Introduction

The size or economic output of the tourism industry in the world economy continues to increase; in fact, according to the World Tourism Organization (2010), the dollar value attained 850 billion dollars in 2009 with 880 million international tourists, with an anticipated 1.6 billion tourists by 2020. Nonetheless, even if this economic sector is fully expanding, it still remains vulnerable to political, economic, and climatic upheavals.

The industry has faced major upheavals with the arrival of Information Technology (IT) and high-tech communications, especially those that allowed the online commercialization of tourism related services, and ushered in a new era in the relationship between the user and companies centered on the tourism sector (Tran, 2012; Bedard & Kadri, 2004). The Internet is increasingly used by organizations, whether to highlight destinations, a product or service, or to develop a new clientele and public awareness. Among the clientele base, seniors aged between 50 years old and over represent an increasingly prominent place in tourism. Tréguer and Ségati (2005) estimate that in the "next five years, with the arrival of the baby-boomers, seniors will become prevalent demographically, economically, and culturally thus the primary clients in almost all existing products and services". They add that less than 10% of marketing expenses will be targeted directly to seniors as a group.

Companies now faced with this new phenomenon are looking to better understand seniors who travel and to identify the means needed to attract them. Our study will help to better understand the means by which seniors use the Internet; specifically, the Web 2.0 when they search for information on products and services related to tourism.

After reviewing the literature on the tourism industry and how seniors search on the Internet, we will detail the qualitative methodology we used, and then we will present and discuss the results of our findings before concluding with the limitations and the perspectives for further research.

2. Tourism, Seniors, and the Researching of Information

The tourism industry is part of the activity sector in which seniors represent a potential for a sizable consumer base. Although there exists a large disparity in revenue and wealth among seniors, it is often characterized in

industrialized countries by a purchasing power that is above average. In addition, a lengthier lifespan is associated with a change in living conditions that favours the service sector, along with seniors in better physical condition (World Tourism Organization, 2010). Besides, seniors have the time to travel throughout the entire year as a rule, and for longer stays, more frequent trips, and farther destinations than younger persons (Fleischer & Pizam, 2002).

Researching information is often crucial when buying a service that cannot be touched, seen, felt, or pre-tested by the consumer (Reinstein & Snyder, 2005). Lack of knowledge with a country far away geographically and also culturally introduces an additional risk to which already includes a dedication of one's time plus a financial investment risk towards products for which personal involvement is high (Frochot & Legoherel, 2007). In order to reduce the uncertainties associated with such decision-making and to evaluate the opportunities inherent in such a product, the consumer collects and assesses the information.

We therefore focus on the actual information gathering or research preceding the purchase (Amine, 1999; Darpy & Volle, 2007) by examining external sources. According to Amine (1999), these can be commercial, interpersonal, or neutral. The first can be qualified as "market oriented thus partisan" aimed at noticing the existence of a product, producing a behavioural reaction, and includes publicity, packaging, sellers, and the Internet. Interpersonal sources such as person to person, one's entourage, and opinion leaders or experts all have a legitimate function and are considered more credible. Neutral sources are grouped as consumer associations, their reviews, reports, and side-by-side product comparison or testing.

Darpy and Volle (2007) make a distinction between commercial and personal sources, the second type being characterized by the presence of a third party with which the consumer can exchange information. Their categorization presents two flaws: they place sellers, along with trade expositions and chat rooms as part of commercial and personal sources, while they find no relevant place for journalists and comparative testing.

Delacroix, Debenedetti, and Sabri (2009) add to commercial and personal sources (friends, family, neighbours, etc.) public knowledge (press articles, blogs, Internet sites) and other sources that can claim experience from trials and information handling. The advice of Net users and the result of experience and comparative shopping seem to belong to personal and experimental sources.

Bargeman and Van der Poel (2006) use the same commercial categories (sellers, travel agents, brochures) and neutrals (tourism offices, travel guides) that Amine (1999) uses, but add social sources (acquaintances, friends, and social media networks) and mass media sources (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet).

These categorizations present a number of problems: they comprise a number of different classes (2 to 4 classes), may contain the same elements in two distinct classes, leave unassigned elements to classes, and is vague between the concept of sources and support. For example, the Internet is cited among commercial sources by Amine, public and experience-related sources by Delacroix et al. (2009), and social sources and mass media by Bargeman and Van der Poel (2006).

The Internet is therefore an indispensible mainstream tool for making purchases by Net users, as confirmed by TNS-Sofres (2010) from a study realized in six European countries. We note that regarding travel and tourism, 82% of Spanish Net users conduct research online before buying, 76% of British users, 73% of Italian users, and 61% of French Net users. By examining the aim of the research by participants as a reference base, the authors of this study identify five Internet user profiles as follows:

- "community-minded" (27%): informed and shares with other consumers;

- "little-involved" (20%): prepare their purchases in physical stores;

- "e-buyers" (19%): buy, particularly in the tourism industry;

- "rational-minded" (18%): compare, and find useful information on the market;

- "economy-minded" (16%): find the best offers;

Besides, the new products and services associated with the Web 2.0, an expression created by Dale Dougherty, Director of O'Reilly Media in 2004, allows individuals to enhance the quality of information. The Net user becomes the co-creator of new applications online, "often initiating in a collective or community manner new forms of Internet connections" (Digimind, 2007). He therefore has the possibility of diffusing the information.

The Web 2.0 is "a culture shared by the Net community that expresses itself within social networks composed of private individuals (friends) and/or professionals and is characterized by obvious elements, on the one hand, such as a simple yet inventive language like SMS, convergent technologies, along with different kind of behaviours

and elements, and, on the other hand, by a set of values, beliefs, and taboos" (Viot, 2009). It comprises two dimensions: social and technological. The first is based on the existence of virtual communities and social networks. The second is exemplified by tools such as avatars, blogs, RSS, widgets, and wikis (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Tran, 2012, 2010).

What is of particular importance in the emergence of the Web 2.0 is the magnitude of the social interaction. Moreover, we have seen that among the information sources that a consumer can contact are those considered as either personal or impersonal, and are characterized by the presence of a partner or moderator with which to exchange information. Furthermore, if the exchange is based on experienced gained, it will be referred to as an experience-based source; however, if it is based on a blog, it will be referred to as a public source by Delacroix et al. (2009). By favouring these exchanges, the Web 2.0 plays an increasingly important role as a source of information for tourists (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

3. Methodology

We selected the qualitative method, because it allows us to analyse the processes and behaviours in depth and to better comprehend the motivations of the people in the survey sample (Hlady, 2002). The primary data collection is based on semi-directed interviews that provide us access to extremely detailed data regarding local micro actions from the participants (Chakravarty & Moyes, 2003).

Our interview guide comprises two dimensions, one dealing with the skills and mastery of the Internet by the participants, and the other dealing with the Internet that involves travel arrangements. The first dimension deals with the frequency of Internet usage and the degree of proficiency with this tool by seniors. The second dimension requires seniors to describe in the smallest details their research procedures for finding information on the Internet that led to purchasing their last vacation travel package. The description of this procedure will assist in measuring the weight and the place that each participant assigns to the Web 2.0. Each interview requires a minimum time of forty-five minutes.

Our approach is part of a joint Canadian and French international comparison study. A study by Mc Robert, Terhanian, Alldredge and Keppler (2010) shows that Internet utilization measured as the number of hours online by consumers is very close in both countries, with France logging 12.1 hours per week on average, versus 13.1 hours in Canada. However, the importance of the Internet (excluding e-mails) compared to other sources of information differs, with France registering 12% versus 21% in Canada. Considering the similarities and differences, it seems particularly interesting to study in-depth the behaviours of Canadian and French seniors regarding the research of tourism information.

Furthermore, we will distinguish between France proper, and its overseas protectorate, Reunion, 11,000 km away. It is an insular territory where constraints related to travel are particularly difficult, notably in cost and distance, the latter both geographically and culturally.

The survey sample is composed of 22 seniors with the following makeup: 7 French Metropolitan (proper), 7 Canadians, and 8 Reunion citizens, and gender wise with 12 men and 10 women. The average age is 59.5 years, with a breakdown of 13 seniors between 50 and 59 years, 6 between 60 and 69 years, and 3 between 70 and 79 years. They have all use the Internet to research tourism information for at least 10 years on average. Also, on average, they travel on vacation twice per year.

The data collected is classified according to the conceptual coherence principle (Miles & Huberman, 2003). The latter was conducted on the basis of grouping themes that characterize the degree of Internet utilization, researching information on the Internet, and the degree of utilization of tools on the Web 2.0. The procedure for treating the data was done on the basis of content analysis and re-coding responses using the Sphinx software.

4. Results and Discussion

The seniors who were interviewed spend approximately 11.6 hours per week on the Internet, with a high spread depending on home location: In France proper, the average of 5.4 hours is far less than Reunion (12.3) and Canada (17.1). Almost three quarters state they have mastered the use of the Internet (16/22). Regarding the Internet services they use the most apart from Web sites and e-mail, Google is by far the preferred choice of 11 participants. It seems that the notoriety of this Web browser ranks it as quite popular. We note the little use or non-existence of social networks (Facebook, Twitter), RSS, avatars, blogs, widgets, or wikis.

Regarding the researching of tourism information, once again Google plays an important role, for 18 participants mention it as their preference, confirming the conclusions by Xiang and Gretzel (2010). They indirectly access public and merchant sites as well as forums via this browser, which was considered as a characteristic of

moderate Internet users according to Dreze, Lee and Zufriden (2003). However, as stated by Viot (2009), "in France, recent statistics show that Net users have increasingly greater access to research tools", even to an extent that experts themselves are susceptible to using them to find the best offer rather than rely on their favourite sites. It must also be noted that consumers themselves rely on "favourites" for usual purchase (Degeratu, Rangaswamy, & Wu, 2000); but, when it comes to a new type of purchase or involving a travel package for themselves, seniors who participated were more methodological and detail-oriented in their research. On the other hand, participants often contented themselves with viewing only the first page of travel sites.

The principle sites that they know are related to airlines, car rentals, and trains, hotel reservations, tour operators, travel agencies, comparison sites, online guides, and geographic localization sites. Information that is sought by participants concerns price (13), lodging (9), places to visit (7), location (4), tour itineraries (3), and comfort (3).

When it comes to seeking advice from fellow Net users, 13 out of 15 participants in France declared that they discussed issues with other Net users, while no seniors sought advice from their colleagues in Canada.

Those who state that they do not seek the advice of other internet users have very strong views such as: "they do not see any need" (René_C10; Ginette_C13) or "they have no confidence in the advice of other Net users" (Nicole_C14), or "the others do not know any more than I do" (Corinne_F20). Among these participants, a number consult friends or family members: "I consult friends or family members, especially my brother-in-law who travels a lot" *(*René_C10), or "I prefer the grapevine" *(*Albert_C12), or "I prefer discussions with family and certain friends" (Claude_C11).

Seniors in France, whether in France proper or in Reunion, state that they seek the advice of other Net users. Their principal motivations are: "to reassure themselves" (it's more reassuring, or "to confirm a choice that I want" or "to remove any doubt" (Christine_R1), obtain additional information "the advice given is more to the point, precise, and recent than what is in the paper guide" (Stéphane_R8), or "more clear regarding quality" Sophie_F21), or having confidence in them "I have more confidence in these people, but it is necessary to review it …" (Bernard_F22).

While they seek the advice of other Net users, the seniors themselves do not contribute, with the exception of 3 French participants, to the forums or sites by providing their own advice or opinions. Among these three individuals, one does so in a systematic fashion while the other two do so in rare situations: "when I am either very satisfied or very unsatisfied" (René_R2), or "in rare cases, when it looks very good or very bad, or if I have concerns" (Sophie_F21). The arguments for not giving advice themselves are as follows: lack of time "I will not waste my time leaving notes … whether pleased or not, I do not have the time" (Monique_R7), or a lack of interest "I have no such interest and I would not necessarily be credible" (Maria_C9), or the lack of competence "I do not have the finesse; I tried once, to no avail" (Stéphane_R8), or refusal "I do not want to be seen on Facebook, so I'm careful (Bernard_F22), or "no grandstanding like in Facebook" (Patrick_F17).

By searching for advice from unknown Net users who have had experience with a particular vacation, the seniors see them as persons who may possibly help them make their choice. This particular information collected belongs to "information requested by the entourage, that plays a role as a "safety net" because of their reassuring and credible nature" (Amine, 1993), but are also more precise and recent. It helps them reduce the perceived risk on criteria that they deem important while also retaining the feeling of being in charge of their choice, and to keep some distance from different recommendations received from close friends and family.

We observe that most seniors who participated in this study did not immerse themselves in the culture of the Web 2.0 to the extent as described by Viot (2009): the myths, language, and technologies of the obvious part of the iceberg are remote and unknown to them; as far as the obscure part, they are worried about maintaining respect for their private lives, notably with social media sites. Therefore they share in the taboos; however, they are far from the notion of sharing information, and feel no moral obligation to render mutual assistance. In fact, they have a utilitarian behaviour by seeking information from other Net users with whom they often have more confidence in than with private companies. These results by the seniors surveyed are the basis for the typology as follows:
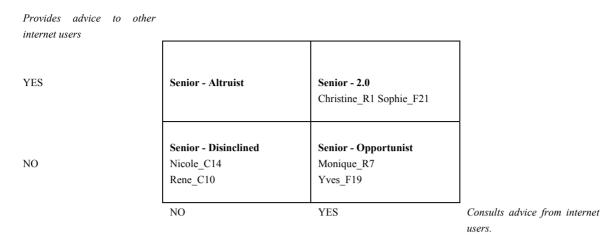
Provides advice to other internet users

YES	**Senior - Altruist**	**Senior - 2.0** Christine_R1 Sophie_F21
NO	**Senior - Disinclined** Nicole_C14 Rene_C10	**Senior - Opportunist** Monique_R7 Yves_F19
	NO	YES

Consults advice from internet users.

Figure 1. Typology of seniors faced with advice from other Net users

Community-minded seniors (opportunists), as defined in the Tns-Sofres (2010) study, seek information and exchange with other Net users of like mind. Among **opportunistic seniors,** we distinguish between those who "profit" from the advice of others: "I find the data and use it!" (Monique_R7) and others who shield themselves behind the reasons previously mentioned. **Disinclined seniors** do not seek the advice of unknown internet users nor provide any. Consequently, we must distinguish between those who are totally hostile to any form of exchange of information from those who do exchange information with close friends and family. Our sample did not include **altruistic seniors** dedicated to helping others, who freely give advice to others without asking for reciprocity.

Finally, a very large majority of seniors interviewed feel that the Internet has considerably changed their way of researching information from different sources. The recommendations from other internet users, browsers, hotel and airline Web sites, new destination portals, and online travel agencies have now become commonplace. Traditional methods for gathering information such as visiting travel guides and travel agencies are much less frequented than before. These results are part of the tendency observed by Patkose, Stokes and Cook (2005) based on their interviews with Americans on researching information specifically for entertainment purposes.

The changes far surpass the scope of simply researching information. In fact, the purchasing procedure is modified by a more active role undertaken by seniors. The latter now have a feeling of having become more competent (confident and knowledgeable) vis-à-vis travel agencies: "before arriving at a travel agency, I know what to expect and I can more easily judge if the package that I am presented with is the best offer" (Nicole_C14), or "before I always went to a travel agency in France; now I find smaller, foreign travel agencies who offer prices at 30% to 50% lower!" (Bernard_ F22). "Seniors can even go further by copying the procedures of travel agencies and preparing their own package, as I do!" (Monique_R7).

Today, the Internet and particularly the Web 2.0 offers the possibility of directly connecting tourists with potential tourists, thus providing important information and reassuring seniors who are increasingly more numerous in buying their packages online.

5. Conclusion: Limits and Future Research

This exploratory work presents interesting results but its usefulness at generalization is limited. A more in-depth quantitative approach to continue this research would be appropriate.

Looking at the results, the seniors who participated, whether they are French from the mainland or from Reunion, or Canadians do not use all the tools available on the Web 2.0, in particular the wikis, widgets, and the RSS. They often even ignore their existence while at the same time profess to have mastered the Internet. Therefore, it is currently difficult for private sector companies, at least in tourism, to develop products adapted to their clientele of seniors through these means.

Regarding social networks, they are categorically rejected by seniors interviewed. While they are used to launch viral marketing campaigns, this does not seem pertinent to seniors and the tourism industry considering the results of our exploratory study. A first step would be to sensitize seniors to their existence and to their usefulness as community tools (widgets, RSS, Wikis) so seniors may profit from them.

As well, the Web 2.0 allows seniors today to easily access sites with other Net users and participate in the exchange of information hence simplifying online research and purchasing. Person to person communication, once limited to a core entourage, now encompasses a community of Web users. Horizontal communication has increased due to forums, acting as a counterweight to vertical company-consumer communication. Seniors have accepted and adopted this form of communication with confidence by a large majority. Organizations that work in the tourism industry must take this into account by noting the information being exchanged and offering a similar medium on their own Web sites in order to "regain" the confidence of consumers. However, the issue of distinctiveness, as demonstrated by seniors in Canada, must be must be addressed in a future study.

We observe that seniors categorically make purchases on the Internet without seeking assistance or contacting a salesperson (they no longer visit a retail outlet in person). We are definitely in the "e-buyer" era where research is conducted *online* to actually buy *online*, particularly in the area of tourism, according to TNS-Sofres (2010).

Finally, Organizations must integrate in their communication strategy the important growth of the Web 2.0. The possibility that the Net user can consult a company site and leave a message reflects a desire by an increasingly large number of senior Net users. However, the organisation must ensure that its integrity is completely irreproachable in order to limit the risk of any negative effects on its image. This is the challenge that commercial or public organizations must meet to fully profit from the advantages offered by the Web 2.0 (Chui, Mille & Roberts, 2009).

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