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Wooyang Kim

Minnesota State University Moorhead

Dale A. Cake

Savannah State University

Hyun Sang An

Minnesota State University Moorhead, hyunsang.an@mnstate.edu

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Role of Social Media on Travel Destination Decision-Making: Young American's Motivation, Attitude, and Behavioral Intention

Wooyang Kim

Minnesota State University, Moorhead

Dale A. Cake

Savannah State University

Hyun Sang An

Minnesota State University, Moorhead

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how social media influences American Millennials' and Gen Zers' travel destination decision-making process in an integrative theoretical framework of *Uses and Gratification Theory* (UGT) and *Theory of Reasoned Action* (TRA). Social media is a primary marketing communication channel that fulfills multiple needs and wants for these two generations. When it comes to their travel needs, the primary role of social media is to satisfy their escape, vicarious pleasure, and information-seeking needs, thus motivating them to look for "instagrammable" destinations that promote their travel experience (Meyers, 2021). UGT has been developed to examine factors leading individuals to use media to gratify their social and psychological needs. Media users are goal-directed in their behaviors (Katz et al., 1973), so they are fully aware of their needs and select the appropriate media to gratify their needs by seeking information to satisfy their utilitarian and intrinsic needs and to obtain vicarious pleasure through social media postings (An et al., 2020). TRA is a comprehensive model that examines individuals' belief structures, attitudinal and normative components, behavioral intention, and actual behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). This theory argues that individuals' behavioral intentions and consequences are influenced by their attitudes that are formed by enjoyment-type in emotions (Aldousari et al., 2016; Park et al., 2022). This integrative framework of UGT and TRA is reasonable for investigating how social media affects young consumers' attitudes toward their travel destination and their decision-making process. Young generations, who desire escapism and entertainment in order to relax through their everyday lives, are looking for value brought to their lives from vicarious out-of-routine experiences (Overby & Lee, 2006) through social media (Spang, 2017), which engenders process gratification (Stafford & Stafford, 2001). This process evokes the desire to experience and explore the destination they viewed on social media (Marder et al., 2019), inducing vicarious pleasure that leads to affective responses toward the travel destination (Marder et al., 2019). Notably, a positive attitude is generated when they perceive social media postings shared by other users as relevant to satisfy their information-seeking needs (Ko et al., 2005). From this aspect, travel information seekers may draw mental pictures of the posted travel destinations by others based on emotional interpretations (Királ'ová & Pavlíčeka, 2015). They may provide personal opinions about the posted destinations if they are stimulated by positive emotion and anticipate positive social benefits as a role of eWOM

(Pandey & Sahu, 2017). That is, the better the attitude toward travel destinations, the greater their intentions to follow the destination's official social media to learn more about them as desired destinations (Tham et al., 2020) and the greater their willingness to visit those destinations (Williams, 2006). This study conducted survey research ($N=273$) to analyze the proposed hypothetical relationship by computing structural equation modeling after confirming construct validities. Twenty-four questions were asked to measure escape needs (ESC), vicarious pleasure needs (VPN), information-seeking needs (ISN), attitude (ATT), word-of-mouth for destination (WOMD), word-of-mouth for information source (WOMS), intention to follow the destination's official social media page (FOL), and intention to visit the destination (VIT). The overall result showed a satisfactory fit of the data and positively supported all sequential relationships. Combined results revealed an efficacy of an integrative theoretical framework of UGT and TRA which articulates how social media postings affect young American travelers' motives in their decision-making process of travel destinations. The findings suggest that those travelers are motivated by escapism, vicarious pleasure, and information-seeking gratification to utilize social media and that motivational factors shape positive attitudes toward the posted travel destination and accelerate subsequent behavioral intentions of these travelers. Accordingly, social media marketers should ponder showing "instagrammable" components in the visualized scenes so as to enhance positive attitudes toward the target destinations in social media posts. It will foster a more engaged relationship with those Millennial and Gen Z travelers and increase traffic to the social media pages.

Keywords: *social media, travel destination, young consumers, uses and gratification theory, theory of reasoned action.*

References are available from the authors upon request.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Wooyang Kim (Ph.D., Temple University) is Associate Professor of Marketing at Minnesota State University, Moorhead. His research interests are consumer decision processes, consumer innovativeness, service consumption, and cultural marketing. His research papers can be found in several academic journals, conference proceedings, and edited books. He has been honored with best paper, junior faculty, and Google i-10 high citation-impact awards in several academic societies. He currently serves as an editorial board and reviewer in marketing-related journals.

Dale A. Cake (DBA, Jacksonville University) is Assistant Professor of Marketing and Department Coordinator, Savannah State University. His research endeavors are in-store consumer behavior, consumer engagement, and radical innovation development and launch. He has presented research at numerous conferences, as well as published in top academic journals. Before joining higher education, he spent 25 years in consumer marketing and brand management, marketing research and communications for major consumer packaged goods companies and as a consultant.

Hyun Sang An (Ph.D., Rutgers University) is Assistant Professor of Marketing and Department Co-Chair at Minnesota State University, Moorhead. His research interests include social media marketing, online consumer behavior, retail marketing, and cultural consumption behavior. His

studies has been published in marketing journals and conference proceedings. Also, his studies have been recognized as the best paper and the best abstract in some academic societies.