

# Social media utilization of tourists for travel-related purposes

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tourists

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this study is to determine social media use by consumers for travel-related purposes.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A quantitative study was conducted after reviewing the related literature. The primary data were collected by means of an online questionnaire, and the results were analyzed using a statistical package program.

**Findings** – The respondents use social media intensively both in their daily lives (> 96 per cent) and in travel-related activities (95 per cent). In addition to the detailed analyses of their usage, a model was developed to identify the factors behind social media use for travel-related purposes.

**Research limitations/implications** – As a result of an online questionnaire method, only consumers having an Internet access could respond to the survey. Additionally, the sample was not random, and the respondents were selected only from Turkey. Consequently, the study may suffer from a generalization problem, especially for markets with major different cultural characteristics.

**Practical implications** – The findings of the study may assist academics and practitioners to better understand social media and Web 2.0 technologies and their effects on consumers.

**Originality/value** – One of the dominant trends affecting consumer behavior and tourism marketing in recent years is the use of social media. It is critical to understand such developments and their effects on consumer behavior that may impact on the distribution and accessibility of travel-related information.

**Keywords** Consumer behavior, Tourism, Turkey, Web 2.0, User-generated content, Social media

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In recent years, information flow on the Internet has become bidirectional in addition to its traditional unidirectional information exchange. New and innovative applications introduced to Web 2.0 created a new social mode for human interaction on the Internet. Furthermore, as a result of their widespread adoption by consumers and businesses, social media and user-generated content (UGC) have recently become a mass phenomenon. As of September 2013, 7 of the top 15 Web sites were social media sites, along with 6 search engines and 2 online shopping sites, which also may include UGC (Alexa, 2013). Facebook was the first social network to surpass one billion registered accounts, while the micro-blogging network Twitter had over 500 million and blogging service Tumblr had more than 216 million registered blog users (Statista Inc. Website, 2013; Statistic Brain Website, 2013).



Traditionally, for tourism businesses, the Internet has been one of the most important marketing communication channels, and tourism has been ranked as the foremost industry in terms of volume of online transactions (Akehurst, 2009; Werthner and Ricci, 2004; Wong and Law, 2005). In recent years, social media has become an effective marketing channel in integrated communications and marketing of tourism services (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Consequently, developments in social media generate both opportunities and challenges for tourism businesses.

As a result of the widespread use of UGC by consumers, and the strong relationship between information technologies and the tourism industry, it is not a surprise that travel-related topics are among the most popular issues in social media. Today, more than 80 per cent of online consumers check various types of UGC for their travel-related purchasing decisions (Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Pantano and Di Pietro, 2013). Travel plans, destinations, hotel reviews, tourist guides and suggestions for restaurants are ever increasing discussion topics. Moreover, social media use is not limited to the pre-travel stage, consumers use them at any stage of their travel periods (Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Leung *et al.*, 2013). Some authors have started to use the term Travel 2.0 to denote this trend of travel in the Web 2.0 environment (Miguéns *et al.*, 2008; Muñoz-Leiva *et al.*, 2012). In terms of consumer behavior, social media provides tourism companies with unprecedented opportunities to understand and respond to consumer preferences, and what their guests like and dislike about them and their competitors (Law *et al.*, 2014).

In recent years, the use of social media is one of the dominant trends affecting consumer behavior in tourism. As a consequence, social media use in travel is a relatively new and trending topic for both academics and practitioners. Despite the current widespread adoption of social media by both consumers and suppliers, successfully manipulating and managing social media still remains largely unfamiliar to practitioners and scholars (Leung *et al.*, 2013; Zheng and Gretzel, 2010). Consequently, studies that resolve the lack of empirical data to describe and explain the role of social media in tourism and travel industry may fill an important gap in the literature.

The aim of this study is to determine the social media use of consumers for travel-related purposes. After reviewing the literature, a quantitative study was conducted. The first part of the paper reviews the current literature under four sub-topics: the concept of social media, the classification of social media, the effects of social media use on consumer behavior and social media in tourism industry. The second part contains a quantitative analysis to determine the social media habits of tourists. In the research, social media and travel habits of the respondents and their travel-related social media use were analyzed. In addition to these analyses, a model was developed to identify the factors behind social media use for travel-related purposes. Finally, conclusions, implications, limitations and possible future studies are also presented.

### **Literature review**

While Web 2.0 technologies have become more prevalent, the Internet is evolving from a push marketing medium to a peer-to-peer generation and sharing of data mode. This evolution affects the tourism industry in many ways: the proliferation of travel-specific online communities and social networking sites; the changing behaviors of travelers with regards to information search and travel planning; and the integration of social media into the marketing approaches of tourism organizations for the development of

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more customized and efficient strategies (O'Connor, 2010; Pantano and Di Pietro, 2013). Thus, it is possible to say that the literature regarding the study has several sub-categories.

I began to review the literature by describing a social media concept and, based on this definition, summarized social media's classifications. Afterwards, any discovered relationships between social media and consumer behavior were reviewed. Finally, social media use in tourism was presented.

### *Web 2.0 and social media*

The source of data presented on the Internet has been changed by a number of developments collectively known as Web 2.0. By definition, Web 2.0 is perceived as the second generation of Web-based services that emphasize online collaboration and sharing among users. Enabling and encouraging of UGC is one of the main characteristics of Web 2.0. Due to these developments, which emerged in early 2004, consumers no longer depended on company-originated information as they increasingly relied on unfiltered information provided by the other consumers in the form of UGC (Munar, 2010; O'Connor, 2010).

During the Web 2.0 era, social media applications exploded in popularity and use, thus providing a plethora of opportunities encouraging self-expression and sharing of content (Fotis *et al.*, 2012). Social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of UGC (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

From a marketing point of view, social media may be characterized as consumer-generated content instead of UGC; therefore, some authors prefer to use a new term: consumer-generated media. This term emphasizes the commercial use of social media, which can be described as a variety of online information created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities and issues (Lange-Faria and Elliot, 2012; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Zheng and Gretzel, 2010).

### *Types of social media*

Numerous Web sites and online applications contain UGC and, because of the popularity of these sites, many such sites are launched almost daily. These applications exist in a variety of forms and serve numerous purposes. Some authors classified these applications by considering their common and dissimilar features.

Mangold and Faulds (2009) classified social media types in 15 groups such as: social networking sites, creativity works sharing sites, user-sponsored blogs, company-sponsored blogs, company-sponsored cause/help sites, invitation-only social networks, business networking sites, collaborative Web sites, virtual worlds, commerce communities, podcasts, news delivery sites, educational materials sharing, open source software communities and social bookmarking sites.

Zheng and Gretzel (2010) performed a more compact breakdown of social media as virtual communities (e.g. Lonely Planet), consumer review sites (e.g. Trip Advisor), blogs (e.g. Blogspot), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), media sharing sites (e.g. YouTube) and others (e.g. Wikipedia).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) classified social media sites using two dimensions by social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure. Combining both

dimensions lead them to a classification of Social Media in six categories: blogs, social networking sites, collaborated projects, content communities, virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds. In a travel-related study, Fotis *et al.* (2012) grouped social media within six broad categories by removing the latter two categories from the classification by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) and adding two more categories: microblogs and travel review Web sites.

The categories in the literature were examined for this study in terms of conformity to purpose, simplicity and compactness. Consequently, social media sites were classified into seven groups as virtual communities (e.g. Facebook), travel-specific sites (e.g. Trip Advisor), picture and video sharing (e.g. YouTube or Flickr), blogs (e.g. Blogger), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), micro-blog sharing (e.g. Twitter) and others (Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Zheng and Gretzel, 2010).

#### *Effects of social media usage on consumer behavior*

In tourism, consumers' behavior has always been influenced by developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs), and especially Web 2.0 dramatically changed how consumers plan and purchase travel-related products (Fotis *et al.*, 2012). From information search to product consumption and post-experience engagement, social media is intensely used by consumers for tourism and travel industry products (Buhalis and Law 2008; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010).

Consumer behavior in e-tourism can be explained mainly with the help of the following three fields of research:

- (1) theories of consumer behavior;
- (2) models of decision-making in tourism; and
- (3) theories of technology acceptance (Steinbauer and Werthner, 2007).

In this study, effects of social media usage on consumer behavior will be discussed under these three subtopics:

- (1) Theories in consumer behavior are generally developed to better understand and explain consumer decisions and behavior. These theories investigate consumer behavior to derive practical implications for predicting and influencing consumer decisions (Steinbauer and Werthner, 2007). A consumer's buying behavior is very complex and influenced by many factors. Hence, the theories in consumer behavior cover many dimensions, such as: consumer psychology, marketing stimuli, social and personal characteristics, consumer characteristics and culture. Moreover, even consumers' decision-making process and technology acceptance can be covered by this field (Kotler and Keller, 2006). Some subtopics have relatively stronger relationships with social media marketing such as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and online complaint management, so that the propensity to use social media and online communities will be discussed in more detail.

From a marketing point of view, social media is increasingly used as evaluation platforms for consumer experiences (Morosan *et al.*, 2014). In a sense, the role of social media, enabling customers to talk to one another, is an extension of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. Such eWOM is thought to be important for

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services, particularly those that are complex or are associated with high-risk such as leisure travel. This is because their intangible nature makes pre-purchase trial impossible. Like traditional WOM, the conversations occurring between consumers are outside the direct control of businesses. Although eWOM can be evaluated as an extension of traditional WOM, it has some unique characteristics:

- The first difference lies in the magnitude of the effect. Conventional marketing wisdom has long held that a dissatisfied customer tells ten people. However, in the new age of social media, he or she can now potentially influence thousands of consumers.
- The second difference is about types of tools. Social media springs from mixed technology and media origins that enable real-time communication, and uses multi-media formats and numerous delivery platforms with global reach capabilities.
- The third difference is about acquaintanceship between message sender and receiver.

Traditionally, WOM has been used in the context of familiarity, whereby people knew each other and formed relationships with one another. With eWOM, geography is no longer a communication barrier and anonymity is possibly making self-disclosure easier than ever before (Lange-Faria and Elliot, 2012; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; O'Connor, 2010).

Social media provides a very effective mechanism for consumers to air complaints. Additionally, complaints in social media provide the tourism industry with unprecedented opportunities to understand and respond to consumer preferences, and what their guests like and dislike about them and their competitors (Law *et al.*, 2014; Leung *et al.*, 2013). At present, many tourism practitioners are unaware of the many platforms which exist and how to handle e-complaints. This results in losing customers and creating negative WOM. To prevent the widespread damage of e-complaints, tourism managers should follow social media in a planned manner and try to handle feedback professionally (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Mattila, 2004).

Despite the popularity of UGC, critical perspectives show that not everybody is a writer or enthusiastic information sharer (Munar, 2010). Although many consumers find such posting valuable and trustworthy, a much smaller portion of Internet users report that they have contributed to social media (Dellarocas *et al.*, 2010). There may be some factors which affect the sharing of experiences by consumers in social media:

- The first group of these factors may be consumers' personal characteristics and contingencies. Travelers share in social media to satisfy any number of needs: from functional, social, hedonistic, to psychological (Lange-Faria and Elliot, 2012).
- Another factor affecting the propensity to review may be product's characteristics. For example, in terms of product popularity, a population's average propensity to contribute online reviews is generally U-shaped, that is most popular and least popular products may attract more reviews (Dellarocas *et al.*, 2010).
- The third factor may be the satisfied feeling of consuming experience. Consumers often initiate a WOM spreading process due to extreme feelings associated with a product experience, such as pleasure or disappointment (Burgess *et al.*, 2009).

Virtual travel communities (VTCs) can be formed through the use of social media to share information and to help each other. Such social media providers use storytelling which enhances a sense of belonging to these VTCs (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). By analyzing VTCs' content, travel organizations can understand their customers' behavior, and undertake corrective actions to improve their offerings. VTCs may also help tourism companies to increase brand awareness and strengthen brand association (Buhalis and Law, 2008). In addition to regular users, VTCs may have some "travel opinion leaders". Although a small proportion, these leaders are more likely than others to have a significant impact on the information which is accessed by many (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

- (2) Theories of decision-making in tourism mostly focus on identifying various aspects of a tourist's decision because travel planning is a complex and multi-faceted decision-making process (Steinbauer and Werthner, 2007).

The traditional consumer decision-making model proposes five key stages which are need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase evaluation (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Kotler and Keller, 2006; Law *et al.*, 2014). Because of specific properties of the tourism industry, many authors prefer to combine the first three stages into one stage and analyze travel period in three stages: pre-travel, during-travel and post-travel stages (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Leung *et al.*, 2013; MacKay *et al.*, 2002; MacKay and Vogt, 2012; Woodside and King, 2001). In this study, this approach, using the three consecutive stages, was preferred because of its conformity to the tourism industry.

Travelers generally access and review online travel information in early phases of their decision-making process to minimize the risk of making a poor decision (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Leung *et al.*, 2013). From this purchase decision-making process point of view, social media has many tools and applications supporting all of the steps and is extensively used in every step by tourists.

Information search is a significant part of consumers' purchase decision-making process, from both the traditional and the travel industry's points of view. The Internet revolutionized this initial step (Mattila, 2004). In addition to the traditional use of the Internet, social media not only reduces uncertainty and perceived risks but also enhances the quality of trips (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). In general, over 60 per cent of people check online reviews, blogs and other customer feedback before buying a new product or service (O'Connor, 2010). This ratio is more than 80 per cent in the travel and tourism industry (Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Pantano and Di Pietro, 2013). In addition, over 80 per cent of those who consulted such material said that it had at least some influence on their subsequent purchase final decisions (O'Connor, 2010).

Although lack of information may lead to poor decisions, one of the problems that the Internet has created is a wealth of too many choices. This is often the result when a consumer commences seeking information in a generic search engine such as Google. A recommender system can support travelers in a complex decision-making process by identifying better customer requirements and by correlating those to other consumers and their preferences (Buhalis and Law, 2008).

Information reliability is another factor in consumers' decision-making process. UGC has much credibility in the eyes of consumers as unbiased and relevant input. In general,

online consumer reviews are considered more trustworthy and credible than information provided by suppliers of products and services. (Akehurst, 2009; Burgess *et al.*, 2009; Lange-Faria and Elliot, 2012). This feedback is perceived as highly credible as the writer is usually seen as being independent of the company, and thus does not gain directly from advocating the product or service (Dellarocas *et al.*, 2010; O'Connor, 2010; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

There may be some concerns about UGC adversely affecting the use of social media during consumer purchase decision-making process. Among these concerns are:

- trustworthiness and reliability;
- lack of relevance to user;
- extreme opinion; and
- security and privacy concerns (Burgess *et al.*, 2009).

In addition, linguistic diversity is another barrier to use or share information in social media. Although automatic software programs for translation are available through Web sites, and the use of English as second or third language has been expanding throughout the world, language proficiency is still a barrier (Munar, 2010).

- (3) Although consumers' adaptation to social media is an important topic in this area, owing to the infancy of social media in the corporate world, limited investigation of social media adaptation models has been undertaken. Some models like "social organising model", "social media strategy learning curve", "social media adoption curve", "social engagement journey" and "social media maturity model" try to explain the adaptation to social media only from a business perspective (Chikandiwa *et al.*, 2013). One of the most important models trying to explain consumers' adaptation to new trends and technologies, including social media, is the technology acceptance model (TAM) developed by Davis in 1989. According to this model, a predisposition to use new technology is determined by two factors: the perceived usefulness of the innovation; and its perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989).

Subsequent studies based on the TAM, have tried to improve the model by proposing minor changes or extending the model by identifying the predecessors of the two factors (Fusilier and Durlabhji, 2005; George, 2002; Jeong and Choi, 2005; Ryan and Rao, 2008).

### *Social media in tourism*

Because of the information-intense structure of the industry, ICTs have been transforming tourism in both business practices and strategies as well as in industry structures for many decades (Zheng and Gretzel, 2010). The establishment of computer reservation systems in the 1970s and global distribution systems in the late 1980s, followed by the development of the Internet in the late 1990s, have all transformed the industry dramatically and have created an e-tourism concept (Buhalis and Law, 2008). E-tourism supports the interactivity between tourism enterprises and consumers, re-engineering the entire process of developing, managing and marketing tourism products. Social media is challenging existing customer service, marketing and promotional processes throughout the tourism industry. The ICT-driven reengineering has gradually generated a new paradigm-shift, altering the industry structure and

developing a whole new range of opportunities and threats. Consequently, all stakeholders in the tourism industry have gradually seen their roles change and new opportunities and challenges emerge (Buhalis and O'connor, 2005; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

From a consumer's point of view, the quality and the perceived benefits of tourism and hospitality products can not be evaluated before the product is consumed. As tourism-related products and services are high-priced, include high-involvement and well-differentiated in nature, travelers generally review online travel information in early phases of their decision-making process to minimize the risk of making wrong decisions (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Leung *et al.*, 2013). These features of touristic products encourage consumers to use ICTs in general and social media in particular. It seems that social media, in addition to other ICT elements, is becoming increasingly important in the tourism industry (Zheng and Gretzel, 2010).

Presently, social media is used during pre-travel, during-travel and post-travel stages of the travel experience, as well as in every consumer decision-making point. Such points of the travel and tourism industry include travel dates, destinations, hotel reviews, tourist guides and suggestions for restaurants or exhibitions (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Miguéns *et al.*, 2008). Travel-specific social media sites focus on hotels and other information elements concerning sightseeing, renting a car, tour guides, transportation, restaurants/bars or prices and weather conditions (Miguéns *et al.*, 2008).

Nevertheless, it is difficult to say that most of the companies in this industry are exploiting the potential of this technology (Leung *et al.*, 2013). Although social media is an interactive environment, tourism and travel companies use these platforms heavily with advertising focused in the form of static content. This type of advertisement fails to fully develop interactivity with customers. In addition, there is a lack of continuity in the use of these platforms (Hvass and Munar, 2012). Tourism businesses need to implement strategies and tools based on UGC or, at least, to incorporate these technologies to enrich their content (Miguéns *et al.*, 2008). Until now, however, there has been only limited and slow progress made by the industry in embracing business opportunities made possible by social media.

### Research method

The aim of this study is to determine consumers' social media use to support their travel-related activities to better explain their consumer behavior. Within this context, the study tries to answer two main research questions:

*RQ1.* What are the social media habits of tourists in terms of traveling?

*RQ2.* What are the factors behind the use of social media for travel-related purposes?

To investigate in detail, both questions were divided into sub-questions. To investigate the first research question: prevalence, and reasons to use social media, concern and benefit perceptions for consumers and travelers' features and social media usage relationships were examined. As for the second research question, a model was developed to identify the predecessors of the use of social media for travel-related purposes.

The primary data have been collected by means of an online questionnaire administered to the consumers who were asked to complete the survey by considering

their last few journeys. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions; most of them were multiple-choice and took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Six questions were for demographic purposes, three concerned travel habits and another three were about daily social media use. The remaining 10 questions were about social media use as related to any activity in all three travel stages.

The questionnaire was originally developed for the study. As mentioned in the literature review, the data about the travel-related social media use have been collected in three consecutive stages: pre-travel, during-travel and post-travel stages (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Leung *et al.*, 2013; MacKay *et al.*, 2002; MacKay and Vogt, 2012; Woodside and King, 2001). Social media sites were classified into seven groups: virtual communities (e.g. Facebook), travel-specific sites (e.g. Trip Advisor), picture and video sharing (e.g. YouTube or Flickr), blogs (e.g. Blogger), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), micro-blog sharing (e.g. Twitter) and others (Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Zheng and Gretzel, 2010).

The study was applied in the Turkish language to Turkish consumers on the basis of convenience sampling. This involves drawing sample subjects that are both easily accessible and willing to participate in a study (Teddlie and Yu, 2007). Although convenience sampling may result in relatively poor data quality, it is the least costly method in terms of time, effort and money, and willingness to participate may positively affect the quality of responses (Marshall, 1996). Additionally, Turkey is one of the four countries whose citizens' average social media usage is more than 10 hours per month (Statista Inc. Website, 2013). Although the entire sample is from one country, the sample subjects may travel internationally and may communicate with consumers all over the world via social media. Consequently, the findings may produce useful information for the industry worldwide because of the international structure of the tourism industry, even though the entire sample is from one country. Nevertheless, both the sample and language can be considered as limitations of the study.

Consumers were invited to respond to the questionnaire by means of invitation mails and social media messages in various platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and online forums. Data were collected over a two-month period between September and October 2013. By the survey closing date, 228 consumers had participated in the study. Thanks to the pre-settings of the online questionnaire (to prevent submission with required unanswered questions, prevent/allow multiple choices, etc.), all of the responses were valid, and the devised system did not permit inappropriate responses. All data received were downloaded from the survey Web site into a spreadsheet format and were then imported into a statistical package program for further analysis.

## Results

Demographics of the respondents were given in Table I. They were predominantly under the age of 55 years (> 96 per cent), and almost half of the sample (46 per cent) was between the ages of 26 and 40 years. Most of the respondents were male (62 per cent), married (57 per cent) and well-educated with nearly 60 per cent university graduates and more than 33 per cent held master's or doctoral degrees. The household income of the respondents was mainly concentrated in two options having annual revenue less than \$30,000. As mentioned in the limitations of the study, all of the respondents were from Turkey, and therefore nationality was not included among the demographics.

**Table I.**  
Demographics of the  
respondents

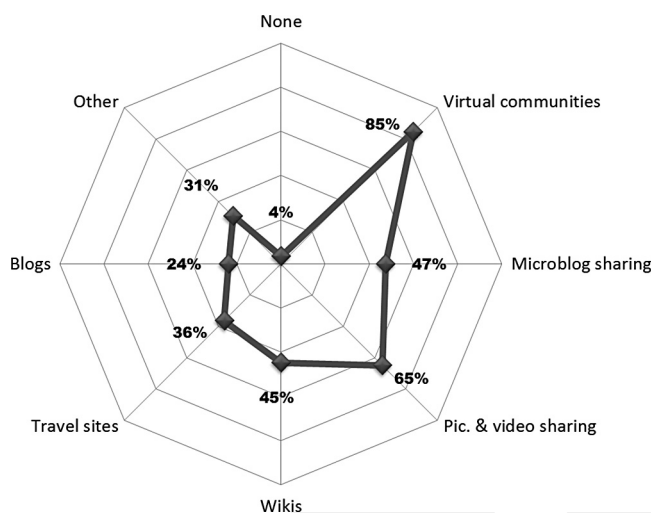
Demographic variables	<i>n</i>	(%)
<i>Age</i>		
< = 25	50	21.9
26-40	105	46.1
41-55	66	28.9
> 55	7	3.1
Total	228	100.0
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	142	62.3
Female	86	37.7
Total	228	100.0
<i>Education</i>		
Primary/secondary	15	6.6
University	136	59.6
Master/PhD	77	33.8
Total	228	100.0
<i>Marital status</i>		
Married	132	57.9
Single	93	40.8
Other	3	1.3
Total	228	100.0
<i>Annual revenue</i>		
<= \$15,000	77	33.8
\$15,001-\$30,000	93	40.8
\$30,001-\$45,000	41	18.0
> \$45,000	17	7.5
Total	228	100.0

### *Social media and travel habits of the respondents*

Figure 1 shows social media types used at least once over the past year by the sample consumers. According to the findings, a very small proportion of the sample (< 4 per cent) does not use social media in their daily life. For the others, popular social media sites were virtual communities (85 per cent), picture and video sharing (65 per cent) and microblog sharing (47 per cent) sites.

The daily use frequencies of social media by the sample were distributed almost equally across all three options. Typically, 35 per cent of the respondents enter social media sites at least five times a day, 35 per cent between two to four times, and 29 per cent once a day or less. Despite this extensive usage of social media, only 2 per cent of the respondents define themselves as a sharer that shares more than average, 43 per cent as an average sharer and 55 per cent as a follower that prefers following others rather than sharing.

Travel habits of the respondents have been determined in terms of two parameters: travel frequency and reservation channel. Fifty-eight per cent of the respondents travel more than once a year, 31 per cent travel once and 11 per cent travel less than once a year. Moreover, 92 per cent of the respondents stated that they traveled in the last 12 months.



**Figure 1.** Types of social media used in the previous 12 months

For this reason, it is possible to say that the sample is sufficient as travel data. According to the results of the question examining their reservation channels, 38 per cent of the consumers make reservation from a travel agency, 37 per cent from a tourism industry Web site, 34 per cent directly from a touristic company and 24 per cent from a travel agency's Web site. Because the respondents were allowed to mark multiple options for this question, the total was more than 100 per cent and the proportions of the options may be high. Despite this, these proportions can be compared with each other. They reveal that the gap between the traditional and online channels is about to close, although traditional channels are still used.

According to the results of the question aiming to determine the Internet connection channels of the sample, 83 per cent of the sample had connection at home, 60 per cent at the workplace and 61 per cent had mobile connection. The most remarkable finding of this question was a very low rate of inaccessibility to the Internet (only one out of 228 had no Internet connection), and a rather high rate via mobile access.

#### *Travel-related utilization of social media*

According to the findings of the study, less than five per cent (4.8 per cent) of the sample did not use social media to support any travel activity. Table II shows social media types used at all three travel stages by the consumers in the sample. Although other social media types such as virtual communities or micro-blog sharing were used much more in the daily life of our sample, travel-specific social media sites had the highest use ratio in

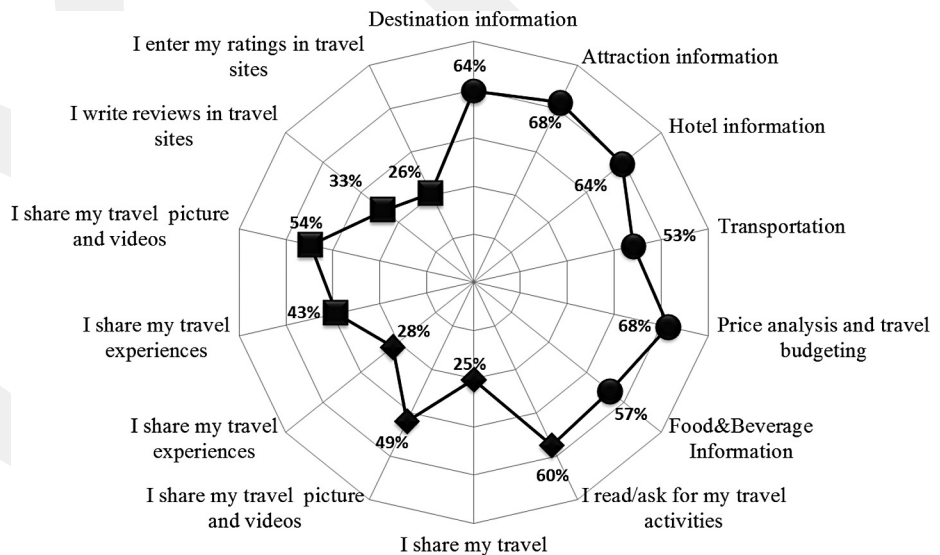
Travel stages	Travel sites (%)	Virtual communities (%)	Pictures and video sharing (%)	Micro-blogs (%)	Wikis (%)	Blogs (%)	Others (%)
Pre-travel	60	46	33	22	23	13	2
During-travel	13	43	25	25	8	9	3
Post-travel	16	36	21	21	7	6	2

**Table II.** The use of social media types in travel stages

travel-related activities. The findings also showed that social media is used more in the pre-travel stage. The greatest difference between the travel stages was observed in travel-specific social media sites. From the sample, 56 per cent used these sites in the pre-travel stage, but only 13 per cent during-travel and 19 per cent post-travel. Other social media types had smaller differences, but most of them had the highest use values in the pre-travel stage. Consequently, it is possible to say that social media may affect consumers' purchase decisions by looking at these findings, including higher pre-travel interactions and more than 95 per cent utilization ratio in whole travel period including all three stages.

Travel-related purposes of social media utilization were given in Figure 2. First of all, higher percentages in pre-travel stage attract the attentions. This result supports the previous findings indicating higher pre-travel rates. According to the utilization percentages having more than 50 per cent of the sample, consumers utilize social media sites to find destination information, attraction information, hotel information, transportation, price analysis and travel budgeting and food and beverage information in pre-travel stage. Consumers also utilize social media to ask/read about travel and to share travel pictures and videos in during-travel stage and only to share travel pictures and videos in post-travel stage.

Consumers' benefit perceptions of social media in terms of traveling were expressed as: "Helps me for more appropriate choices" (73 per cent), "Helps to make more reliable decisions by reducing the uncertainty" (65 per cent), "Provides a platform to share my travel information and pictures" (34 per cent) and "Helps to reduce my travel costs" (33 per cent). On the other hand, most important concerns about social media were: "Concerns about correctness and reliability of the information" (51 per cent), "company directed sharings" (30 per cent), "subjective sharings because of anger or satisfaction" (29 per cent) and "concerns about privacy" (25 per cent).



**Figure 2.**  
Travel-related purposes of social media utilization

**Notes:** Pre-travel purposes are marked with ●, during-travel with ◆ and post-travel with ■

The respondents expressed that they would have more confidence on social media sharings if they: include both positive and negative issues (56 per cent), are shared by friends (54 per cent), are supported by picture and video (45 per cent), if other users agree (44 per cent) or the consumers are convinced that the sharings were not guided by the company (38 per cent).

According to the question examining the relationship between satisfaction and the propensity to share in social media, consumers were eager to share their experience if they were very satisfied (67 per cent) or dissatisfied (56 per cent). Only 32 per cent was eager to share if his or her satisfaction level was moderate. For this reason, I can infer that: extreme feelings about satisfaction of consumers' experience triggers sharing in social media.

Having mobile Internet connection was investigated in more detail because of its possible influencing effects on social media use. Consumers who had mobile Internet connections used social media more in their daily life ( $p < 0.01$ ) and for travel-related purposes ( $p < 0.01$ ). The number of travel-related social media activities of these consumers was also higher than the others ( $p < 0.01$ ). One of the main influencing points of mobile Internet use occurs in the during-travel stage rather than during pre- or post-travel stages. Virtual communities ( $p < 0.01$ ), picture and video sharing ( $p < 0.01$ ) and micro-blogging ( $p < 0.01$ ) use during-travel stage was higher for consumers with mobile Internet connections. Furthermore, some demographics affected mobile Internet usage. For example, as respondents got younger, mobile Internet connection rate increased ( $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, as education level increased, mobile Internet connection rate also increased ( $p < 0.05$ ).

In addition to these findings, relationships between social media usage in the travel stages and demographics, as well as social media habits and travel habits of consumers, were also investigated. One of them was the relationship between demographics and the use of travel-specific social media sites. Within this context, usage of travel-specific social media increased:

- as annual revenue increases ( $p < 0.01$ ), or
- as education level increases ( $p < 0.01$ ).

There were some relationships between demographics and consumers' benefits and perceptions of social media usage for travel-related purposes. Some relationships showed statistically significant differences: the "I have difficulties to understand the sharings because of the language differences" concern was directly affected by education level and inversely proportional ( $p < 0.01$ ). Privacy concerns about social media were more common among females ( $p < 0.01$ ). "Social media helps to reduce my travel costs" benefit was more important for males ( $p < 0.01$ ) and married people ( $p < 0.01$ ). This benefit perception was higher between ages 26-55 years ( $p < 0.01$ ). As social media usage frequency increases, the benefit "social media provides a platform to share my travel information and pictures" became more common ( $p < 0.01$ ). Consequently it is possible to say that people having high social media usage are more enthusiastic to share their travel information or pictures.

#### *Predecessors of "the number of travel-related social media activities"*

As stated in the literature review, social media is intensively used by consumers in the tourism and travel industry during all of the pre-travel, during-travel and post-travel stages of the travel period and all of the purchase decision-making process from

information searching to posting experience engagement (Buhalis and Law 2008; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010; Miguéns *et al.*, 2008). Identifying the factors behind travel-related social media use may produce valuable information for both academicians and practitioners. Consequently, a model was developed and tested to identify predecessors of “the number of travel-related social media activities” in the study.

Within this context, all of the social media activities in all of the three stages of travel were collected in one variable, namely, “the number of travel-related social media activities” and a model was developed using multiple regression analysis with a backward elimination method. Initially, six variables (age, annual revenue of family, number of benefits, number of channels, number of concerns and number of social media sites used last year) were entered as candidate independent variables. According to the regression results, other possible independent variables were removed due to their insignificant interactions with the dependent variable. The “number of travel-related social media activities” was found dependent on two variables: “consumers’ benefit perception of social media” and “number of social media sites used last year”. The value of *F*-ratio was 76.7 ( $p < 0.001$ ), meaning that the results of the regression model could not have occurred by chance and the model can explain 40 per cent (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.400$ ) of the variation in the value of the dependent variable, as seen in Table III.

To validate the model, the regression analysis has been repeated using both forward addition and bidirectional stepwise search methods. In all of these methods, variables are added into or deleted from the model in an iterative manner, one at a time, using different algorithmic approaches. (Yan and Su, 2009; Freund *et al.*, 2006). Both methods produced the same results as the backward elimination method.

Another method which can be used to validate the regression model is cross validation (Yan and Su, 2009, Hutcheson and Sofroniou, 1999). Within this context, the data were split into two subsets randomly, and then regression analysis was applied to them. Both analyses produced similar regression results having the same variables. The adjusted  $R^2$  values (0.416 and 0.404) were within the 0.05 limits of the adjusted  $R^2$  of the entire data set (0.400).

To further develop the model, relationships between two predecessors of the model and the demographics and the travel habits of consumers were analyzed. Because of the non-parametric structure of the independent variables, Mann – Whitney and Kruskal – Wallis tests have been used according to the number of options. The findings showed that the demographic variables of age and marital status had significant differences with the “number of social media sites used last year” ( $p < 0.01$ ). “Consumers using the

Model	Coefficients <sup>a</sup>		
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Number of social media sites used last year	0.228	4.207	0.000*
Consumers’ benefit perception of social media	0.526	9.710	0.000*

**Table III.**  
Results of the regression analysis of the number of social media activities in travel

$R^2$	Adjusted $R^2$	Goodness of fit			Significance
		SE	<i>F</i>		
0.406	0.400	2.248	76.744	0.000	

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>Dependent variable: number of social media activities in travel; \* $p < 0.01$

Internet for hotel reservations” had significantly higher benefit perceptions about social media in travel ( $p < 0.01$ ). Having different numbers of Internet channels also affected the dependent variable “number of social media sites used last year” ( $p < 0.01$ ). Consumers having different daily access frequency to social media had both different “number of social media sites used last year” and “benefit perception of social media” ( $p < 0.01$ ). In the light of these findings, the whole model was concluded and is illustrated in Figure 3.

### Discussion

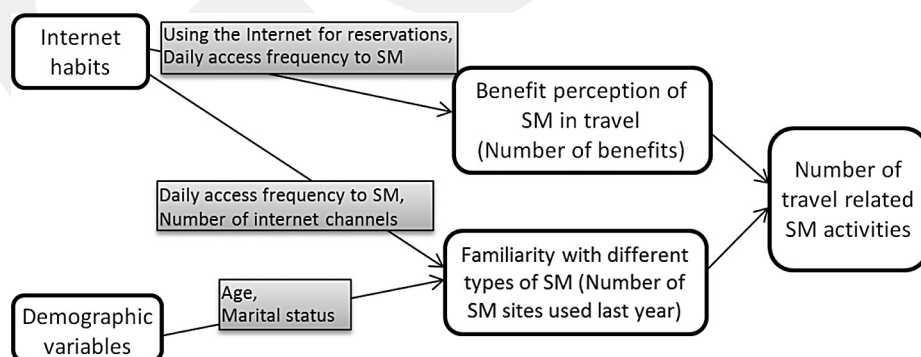
The study aimed to determine social media use of consumers for travel-related purposes. To reach this goal, the study attempted to answer two research questions: “What are the social media habits of tourists in terms of traveling?”, and “What are the factors behind the use of social media for travel-related purposes?”.

To investigate the first research question, prevalence, and reasons to use social media, concern and benefit perceptions for consumers and relationships between travelers’ features and social media use were examined. According to the findings, social media use was widespread among consumers both in their daily life (> 96 per cent) and for travel-related purposes (95 per cent). This high use ratio for travel-related purposes is remarkable and may be possibly caused by:

- It includes the activities in all pre-travel, during-travel and post-travel stages.
- As stated among the limitations, only the consumers, who could access the Internet responded to the online survey.
- Especially for during-travel stage, many hotels provide Wi-Fi Internet access despite high roaming charges.

In terms of travel stages, social media, especially travel-specific ones, were used more in pre-travel stage when the possibility to affect consumers’ purchase decisions is quite high.

Consumers expressed that the main reasons for social media use were to find information about destinations, attractions, hotels, transportation, food and beverages, price analysis and travel budgeting; to ask/read about travel; and to share travel pictures and videos. It is no surprise that six of the eight most important reasons were about information needed in pre-travel stage due to the nature of tourism-related products and services which are high-priced, well-differentiated and require high



**Figure 3.** The predecessors of “the number of travel-related social media activities”

involvement. As stated in the literature review, travelers generally access and review online travel information early in their decision-making process to minimize the risk of making poor decisions (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Cox *et al.*, 2009; Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Leung *et al.*, 2013; Pantano and Di Pietro, 2013; O'Connor, 2010; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). According to these findings, it is possible to state that social media has become one of the important information sources for tourists to make their travel-related decisions.

Consumers' benefit perceptions of social media for their travel process were expressed as: "helps to make more reliable decisions by reducing the uncertainty", "helps me for more appropriate choices", "helps to reduce my travel costs" and "provides a platform to share my travel information and pictures". On the opposite side, some concerns were about: "correctness and reliability of the information", "company directed sharings" and "subjective sharings because of anger or satisfaction". In general, benefit perceptions were much higher than the concern perceptions of the consumers in the sample.

As can be seen from the previous question, one of the most important factors affecting the value of social media sharings for customers is the trust about correctness and reliability. Accordingly, the study investigated the factors affecting customers' trust to social media sharings. The customers in the sample expressed that they would have more confidence on social media sharings, if they included both positive and negative issues (56 per cent), were shared by friends (54 per cent), were supported by picture and video (45 per cent), other users agreed (44 per cent) or they were convinced that the sharings were not guided by the company (38 per cent). These findings may help the tourism industry share more trustworthy and credible social media messages in the eyes of customers while they manage their social media accounts.

In addition to these findings, relationships between social media usage for travel-related purposes and features of consumers were also investigated. From the demographic features' point of view, usage of travel-specific social media increases if annual revenue or education level increases. Besides, there were some relationships between some demographic features and consumers' benefit and concern perceptions on travel-related social media use.

Having mobile Internet connection is one of the most influencing parameters on social media use. According to the results, consumers who have mobile Internet connection use social media more in their daily lives and for travel-related purposes. Additionally, during trip use of social media (especially virtual communities, picture and video sharing and micro-blogging) was higher for consumers who have mobile Internet connection. Some demographics such as age and education level may also affect mobile Internet usage.

The study results showed that extreme feelings about satisfaction of consumers' experience trigger sharing in social media. This finding is consistent with the existing literature about traditional WOM, which says that consumers often initiate a WOM spreading process due to extreme feelings associated with a product experience, such as pleasure or disappointment (Burgess *et al.*, 2009).

As for the second research question, a model was developed and tested to identify predecessors of "the number of travel-related social media activities" in the study. As a result of the regression analysis, "consumers' benefit perception of social media" and "number of social media sites used last year" could be used to explain some of the variance in "number of travel-related social media activities". Consequently, it is

possible to say that consumers, who are familiar with different types of social media sites and have higher benefit perceptions about travel-related social media use, will more likely use social media for travel-related purposes. This study model produced compatible results with the TAM (Davis, 1989). Although the results are not exactly the same because of different methods and scales, the model does not conflict with the TAM. Within this context, “consumers’ benefit perception of social media” can be evaluated as a similar variable with “the perceived usefulness of the innovation” of the TAM. The relationship between the other variables is not very strong. However, it is possible to say that consumers who are more familiar with different social media types may use social media more easily. Thus, the other predecessor of the model “number of social media sites used last year” can be evaluated as an indicator of “perceived ease of use”.

In addition, the analysis to further develop the study model showed that some demographic variables and Internet habits could affect these two predecessors. According to these results, “number of social media sites used last year” was one of the predecessors, and “daily access frequency to social media” was also an important factor for both predecessors. Because these two variables are indicators of social media usage in daily life, it is possible to say that people who use social media sites frequently in their daily life will more likely use social media sites for travel-related purposes.

### Conclusions and practical implications

As stated in the literature review, social media is one of the new and rapidly developing concepts which may influence marketing strategies. Despite the widespread adoption by both tourism consumers and suppliers, successful practices of manipulating and managing social media still remains largely unknown to practitioners and scholars (Leung *et al.*, 2013; Zheng and Gretzel, 2010). Studies resolving the lack of empirical data to describe and explain the role of social media in the tourism and travel industry may produce valuable guidelines, especially for practitioners to develop more successful integrated marketing strategies.

According to the findings of the study, social media use is widespread among consumers, both in their daily lives and for travel-related purposes. In terms of travel stages, social media is used more in pre-travel when the possibility to influence consumers’ purchase decisions is quite high. These findings emphasize the importance of social media from a tourism marketing perspective. Tourism companies should consider social media as an inseparable part of their integrated marketing strategies and handle social media sharings seriously.

The tourism businesses should give special importance to social media messages. Some of these messages can be evaluated as eWOM, and can potentially influence thousands of consumers worldwide. Although these conversations are outside direct control, businesses should try to understand and contribute to company-related messages. To mediate the wide spread of e-complaints, tourism managers should follow social media in a planned manner and handle them professionally. Additionally, they may show special interest in some “travel opinion leaders” who have a significant impact on information accessed by others (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Lange-Faria and Elliot, 2012; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Mattila, 2004; O’Connor, 2010; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

The findings indicate that the people who use social media sites frequently in their daily life will more likely use them for travel-related purposes. These findings suggest

that marketing managers consider all social media types. In addition to travel-specific ones, some other social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, may present additional opportunities. To reach their target customers, travel businesses may advertise on social media sites even if those Web sites are not travel specific.

To develop successful marketing strategies, businesses need detailed information about their customers. This information is essential to understand behavior choices, concerns and determinants of their customers. Due to its bidirectional nature, social media allows tourism organizations to provide customized information that addresses personal needs and preferences of the individual tourist (Buhalis and Law, 2008; O'Connor, 2010; Pantano and Di Pietro, 2011; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Tourism businesses should integrate the information from social media to their systems to understand their customers and to develop personalized services to address individual needs.

Furthermore, the study determined the consumers' benefit and concerns on social media for their travel process. To build strong and sustainable relationships with their consumers, companies may encourage the factors under the benefit perceptions, while trying to avoid the factors under concerns.

The consumers in the sample expressed that trust about correctness and reliability was one of the most important factors affecting the value of social media sharings. They also specified some factors which may increase their confidence on these sharings. These findings may help the tourism businesses to establish more confident social media interactions with their customers. For example, companies may support their social media sharings by pictures and videos to increase the trust of their customers or they may try to elicit positive social media responses from customers to reach out to their customers' families and friends.

Another implication of the study for tourism practitioners is about the relationship between satisfaction perception and social media. Study results underlined that extreme feelings about satisfaction of consumers' experience trigger sharing in social media. In the light of these findings, tourism businesses should attach specific importance to both very satisfied and unsatisfied consumers. They may encourage their satisfied consumers to share in social media and evaluate negative social media sharings seriously, within the scope of complaint management. Consequently, consumers' behavior has always been influenced by developments in ICTs. Social media has dramatically changed how consumers plan and consume travel-related products (Fotis *et al.*, 2012). These developments generate both opportunities and challenges for tourism organizations. This study has provided additional insight into travel-related social media use of consumers to better explain their behaviors. The findings of the study may assist academics and practitioners to better understand social media and Web 2.0 technologies and their effects on consumers.

### **Limitations and future research**

The online questionnaire may be one of the limitations of the study. Consumers, who do not use the Internet could not respond to the survey. Some other limitations of the study were: the sample was not random and the respondents were selected only from Turkey. Although the entire sample is from one country, the findings may produce useful information for the industry worldwide because of the international structure of the tourism industry. Although the entire sample is from one country, the participants may

travel internationally and may communicate with consumers worldwide via social media. Nevertheless, the sample may cause some generalization problems, especially for the markets with different cultural characteristics as was mentioned earlier among the limitations of the study.

Social media use in travel is a relatively new and important topic for both academics and practitioners. Consequently, studies resolving the lack of empirical data to describe and explain its role in the tourism and travel industry may contribute to fill a gap in the literature. Because the topic contains cultural elements, variations in time and sample characteristics may affect the findings. For this reason, future studies which apply consumer samples from countries having different cultures and in various time periods may contribute to this topic's development.

Additionally, further studies which examine the relationships between social media use in travel and consumer decision-making processes may produce valuable information for the tourism industry.

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