Social Media Activism in Tourism

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Abstract

Taking advantage of the many affordances of social media platforms, consumer activism has become a prevalent phenomenon on social media. While it has been studied widely in other fields, tourism literature currently lacks systematic research on travel, tourism and hospitality-related activism on social media. This paper conceptualizes social media activism in light of social media affordances and presents a variety of tourism-related examples. It concludes that tourism-related social media activism is widespread, involving a variety of individual and collective actions, and provides directions for future research in this area.

Introduction

Social media are Web-based communication platforms or applications that take advantage of Web 2.0 technologies, which make it possible for users without technical expertise to easily produce and publish contents on the Internet. Social media encompass a variety of different types, such as social networks, review sites, instant messaging applications, and video and photo sharing sites. Social media adoption is generally high among Internet users and has spread worldwide. For instance, Facebook, globally the most popular social medium, currently has over two billion monthly active users (Statista.com, 2017). However, regional differences exist in terms of what social media are available, to what extent they are used, by whom and in what particular ways. No matter whether someone uses social media or not, they are likely affected by them. Social media have infiltrated our language (e.g. we now tag, defriend and snap), have changed the way we form and maintain social relationships (e.g. we swipe on Tinder and have Facebook friends we have never met), impact how we consume information, especially news (e.g. we subscribe to social media influencers' Twitter feeds), influence how we shop (e.g. we look at ratings and reviews before making a purchase) and have permeated all aspects of our identity and psyche, changing the way we present and think of ourselves and feel (e.g. we post selfies, obsessively check newsfeeds, lie about ourselves and have Facebook envy).

The role of social media in tourism is particularly significant and the impacts of social media use by tourists, destinations and tourism providers are manifold (Gretzel, 2018; Sigala & Gretzel, 2018). Social media have changed the way tourists search for information and plan their trips, experience and document their vacations, connect with other travelers and locals, relate to and communicate with tourism providers, perceive destinations, and share word-of-mouth. Social media are generally conceptualized as serving the following four functions in tourism and beyond: 1) community; 2) publishing; 3) entertainment; and 4), commerce (Tuten & Solomon, 2015). All of these have been dealt with in the tourism literature, with most papers focusing on community, publishing (information) and commerce functions but some also recognizing the entertainment role (Di Pietro et al., 2018). An additional role that has received a lot of attention in other fields but has been largely neglected in tourism is the potential of social media to support different forms of activism. This paper therefore focuses on social media-based activism in tourism. Specifically, it outlines the different forms it can take and provides tourism-specific examples of how it can be realized. To do that, the paper adopts a social media affordance perspective. It concludes with implications for tourism theory and practice and suggests possible avenues for future research.

Consumer activism

The Financial Times (2017:n.p.) defines consumer activism as "the range of activities undertaken by consumers or NGOs to make demands or state their views about certain causes linked directly or indirectly to a company". Similarly, Heldman (2017) conceptualizes it as a form of political protest that involves citizen actions directed toward business entities to explicitly influence their behaviors. While some also include actions taken on behalf of consumers (e.g. consumer protection), this paper focuses only on actions taken by consumers. Consumer activism is therefore fundamentally about either creating desired change or halting undesired change related to consumption issues. Kozinets and Handelman (1998) suggest that consumer activism types differ in terms of their place consideration (local or global), their time considerations (constrained or without time limits), their objectives (from changing business practices to driving companies out of business) and their targets (companies, governments, individuals, etc.). The latter point is important as it suggests that activism does not only target business or government entities but can also be directed at celebrities or other consumers. While much of the literature assumes that consumer activism involves collective action, some authors have highlighted the need to include individual actions such as complaints, negative word-of-mouth and individual decisions to opt out of particular forms of consumption (Penaloza & Price, 1993; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998). Whistle

blowing, the *disclosure of facts by a person, usually an employee in a government agency or private enterprise, to the public or to those in authority, of mismanagement, corruption, ilegality, or some other form of wrongdoing (The Free Dictionary, 2017)* can therefore also be counted as a form of activism.

A term closely related to consumer activism is consumer resistance, which can be defined as "the unwillingness of consumers to adopt a specific product, service or change" (Collins English Dictionary, 2017: n.p.). Penaloza and Price (1993) explain that consumer resistance can take on many forms that vary along several dimensions: 1) An organizational dimension that ranges from individual to collective action; 2) A goal-orientation dimension that ranges from reformist to radical; 3) A tactics dimension that varies from actions directed at altering the marketing mix (for example, fighting for product safety features) to actions directed at altering the meaning of products (for example, using products in unintended ways); and 4) A relationship dimension that distinguishes whether consumer resistance appropriates marketing institutions or tries to stand outside of these institutions .Boycotts fall under the category of consumer resistance and involve complete abstinence or withdrawal from commercial or social relations with persons, companies or countries.

A particular form of activism are social movements. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) specifically look at social movements that aim to change the social order related to consumption and marketing and paint a picture of passionate activists that strongly identify with an issue and convince others to join their cause. Cammaerts (2015: 1027) defines social movements as "a social process through which collective actors articulate their interests, voice grievances and critiques, and proposed solutions to identified problems by engaging in a variety of collective actions". *Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2014) describe* social movements as collective action based on four properties: collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction. Thus, social movements are forms of activism that involve a large group of activists and actions over a sustained period of time.

Figure 1 summarizes these conceptualizations by showing that consumer activism is a broad concept that encompasses many different forms of individual and collective actions, such as protests or whistleblowing. Within activism, consumer resistance refers to specific actions that relate to non-consumption, with boycotts being the most radical form. Consumer movements involve sustained collective actions. Consumer resistance and consumer movements overlap when resistance is collective and sustained.

Figure 1. Conceptualization of Consumer Activism

Social Media Affordances

Activism is increasingly supported by online and especially social media. In order to understand it, a deep understanding of social media is therefore required. Social media allow different forms of communication from other media. On social media, one-to-one, one-to-many, one-to-particular others, few-to-few and many-to-many as well as synchronous and asynchronous conversations are all possible. Social media not only make it easy to create and post contents but also to share contents posted by others. Different shades of participation from pure passive lurking to being a super contributor are available (Hammedi & Virlée, 2018; Linton, Han & Gretzel, 2017). Social media support subscribing/following other social media users or pages to automatically receive content. They allow tagging other social media users to bring them into conversations. They provide users with opportunities to curate contents and use hashtags to link their contents to other contents. Social media permit the creation of elaborate profiles and therefore support sophisticated identity management and personal branding. They facilitate collaborative content creation and socializing. Although the "social" in social media highlights their interactivity, many scholars have pointed out that the interactions can involve simple "likes" or ratings that often constitute very low levels of engagement. Social media also support the emergence of influencers that occupy a middle ground between consumers and commercial users (Kozinets et al., 2010) and play an important role in distributing contents. Social media platforms also play a role in structuring information consumption and communication in that they implement specific algorithms that prioritize the display of certain contents over others, make suggestions to users and support different kinds of search and archiving functions.

These distinct characteristics and features of social media mean that they offer users different affordances. An affordance is defined as the mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action (Faraj & Azad, 2012). In other words, social media affordances describe what types of communication needs a particular application or platform supports. Looking specifically at Weibo, Ge, Gretzel and Clarke (2014) identify five affordance dimensions: 1) visibility; 2) message format; 3)

reachable domain; 4) meta-voice; 5) informed association. Visibility refers to the means and opportunities for presentation of contents (Bregman & Haythornthwaite, 2001), ranging from completely private to completely public. Message format is defined as the appearance of the message on the screen (Herring, 2007). For instance, some platforms have a character limit for posts and others support mostly visual posts, e.g. Instagram. Reachable domain refersto the alternative channels to whichposts can be sent/posted, e.g. to one's own page or another user's page (Chowdhury et al. 2006).Majchrzak et al. (2012) define metavoice as the different ways in which one can react to others' presence, profiles, content and activities and therefore add one's voice to theirs or perpetuate their voice within one's own social networks. Informed association refers to establishing connections between individuals, between individuals and content, or between contents(Ehrlich & Shami, 2010). Thinking about social media more broadly, five additional affordance dimensions can be added, namely identity, discovery, editability, persistence and archivability (Gretzel, 2018). Identity refers to the options for self-representation, discovery describes opportunities to search, filter and display content/people, editability involves options for modifying or deleting content after publication, persistence means access to content only while it is being produced, for a limited amount of time or permanently, and archivability encompasses options to store messages, content, or social connections.

These various affordances together support activism in various ways and lead to unique varieties of activist activities. Indeed, almost all activism now includes activities on social media.

Social Media Activism

Literature in various fields is increasingly recognizing the political power of social media (Shirky, 2011). Social media activism can be defined as a form of cyberactivism that takes advantage of social media affordances to reach its cause-related goals. Cammaerts (2015) stresses the fact that because of the reach of social media, social media activism is highly visible to others and can quickly spread beyond individuals and beyond local communities. Vegh (2003) asserts that social media activism falls into the following categories: 1. Awareness/Advocacy; 2) Organization/Mobilization; and, 3) Action/Reaction. Awareness/Advocacy focuses on distributing information. Organization/ Mobiliziationactivism involves the use of social media to recruit supporters and to coordinate online and offline events. It can also include crowd funding campaigns. Action/Reaction describes the use of social media to encourage particular actions, ranging from harmless requests for likes or reposts to encouragement of so-called hacktivism, e.g. the spamming or hacking of a

company's social media platform.

Social media activism is sometimes referred to as "clicktivism" or "slacktivism" (Karpf, 2010), suggesting that it might not translate into real commitment or offline actions but also emphasizing the ease with which support can be rallied via social media. Miller (2017: 251) explains that social media "help foster social change by creating a conversational environment based on limited forms of expressive solidarity as opposed to an engaged, content-driven, dialogic public sphere". Some researchers have warned that merely engaging in symbolic actions might lead to moral licensing effects and thus less cause-related behavior afterwards (Soyer, Cornelissen & Karelaia, 2013). On the other hand, social media have been identified to support activism because they allow for more fluid membership and asynchronous participation (Cammaerts, 2015). The archival function of social media platforms and persistence of social media contents further contributes to activism being more likely sustained over time. The network ties visible in social media and the ability to identify and target like-minded others help activism spread more quickly. However, the literature also identifies unique constraints to social media activism such as government or company control over social media platforms and the need to reach beyond like-minded others for realizing change.

Butler (2011) suggests that social media activism encompasses many more forms of activism than traditional, offline activism. For instance, changing one's profile picture to raise awareness of a cause or using a specific hashtag are common forms of social media activism. Halupka (2014) further draws attention to social media memes as particularly engaging and viral content that facilitates the spread of cause-related information. Public shaming through retweeting or sharing others' posts and adding negative commentary is also a widespread practice. Activist groups usually create social media pages to which supporters can subscribe. Online petitions are also a frequently used way to try to bring about change, with appeals to sign a particular petition often being automatically posted to the petition signer's social media pages. One of the most successful social media activism examples is the "Ice bucket challenge", which asked social media users to post videos of themselves pouring a bucket of ice over their heads or having someone else do it for them in order to raise awareness of the disease ALS and encourage donations(Kilgo, Lough & Riedl, 2017). It took advantage of the visibility of social media contents, the need of users to present their selves in a positive light, the meta-voice affordance and potential for messages to go viral as well as informed affiliation that afforded the clear identification with the cause. Its strategy has since been copied several times to promote other causes.

Cases of Social Media Activism in Tourism

One of the most famous cases of social media-based complaint behavior in tourism is the case of Dave Carroll, who exposed United Airlines' baggage handling practices with a YouTube video (https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo) that, in the form of a song, tells the story of his guitar being broken and his claims being ignored by the airline. The video turned viral and has now been viewed almost 18 million times. Consumers have also created social media pages solely dedicated to complaining about particular tourism and hospitality related businesses. For instance, "I hate United Airlines" is a Facebook page that is followed and liked by over 3000 individuals (https://www.facebook.com/I-hate-United-Airlines-1213200 57 887779/). However, the most common form of individual actions against companies is online reviews, with TripAdvisor remaining the most prominent platform for voicing complaints and encouraging others to boycott businesses. For example, a reviewer from Australia writes about the World Hotel in New York: "*There is no way on earth I would ever recommend you stay at this hotel. Let me say this again, I am used to camping and staying at youth hotels and can put up with a lot, but this was just plain filthy and noisy*". This particular form of consumer activism in tourism has been recognized by Mkono and Tribe (2017).

Social-media based whistle blowing exposing problematic or even illegal practices by tourism and hospitality businesses is becoming more and more common as smart phones make it extremely easy to capture evidence and immediately share it with others online (CNBC, 2017). A recent example includes a video of a passenger being dragged off a United plane by law enforcement after he refused to give up his seat in an overbooked plane (The New Yorker, 2017). The video was first posted on Twitter and quickly spread to other platforms (New York Times, 2017). This particular incident led to widespread consumer activism by social media users with hashtags such as #unfriendlyskies (mocking the airline's slogan) and #boycottunited. What is important to note is that the social media-based activities were noticed by mainstream media and messages were further perpetuated by their "official" reports. An example involving employees uncovering unethical behavior is the case of a Pizza Hut policy that threatened employees with punishment if they evacuated because of the imminent arrival of hurricane Irma during their shifts. An employee took a picture of the policy displayed on an employee notice board and posted it on Twitter (National Post, 2017).

Hardy, Wickham and Gretzel (2013) present the case of recreational vehicle travelers uniting via virtual communities in an effort to change local policies regarding overnight parking. This specific activism case was mostly directed

against Walmart where these travelers had previously been allowed to park. By not shopping at Walmart anymore, these travel consumers used their purchasing power to put pressure on the company as well as the local government. Because of their active use of social media and their strong feelings of solidarity, they were able to quickly disseminate information and mobilize collective action. Destinations International (2017) reports on a number of cases of consumer-organized travel boycotts to specific destinations in the United States because of court rulings or legislation put in place. A particularly interesting case is #boycotthawaii, which was first spread by Trump supporters when a court in Hawaii ruled to put the U.S. President's travel ban on hold. It was quickly taken up by Hawaiian residents to express anti-tourism sentiments and used to further encourage tourists to stay away from the overcrowded islands (Huffington Post, 2017). An anti-tourism movement emerged this summer in Europe (The Straits Times, 2017) with hashtags such as #touristgohome being used to spread awareness and organize protests in the streets of several cities. The activists involved in the movement took advantage of Twitter and Facebook to disseminate information and get the interest of mainstream media.

Change.org, one of the most popular websites for petitions that takes advantage of social media to help activists spread their messages and mobilize support, currently features a number of travel-related petitions. For instance, one petition asks Air China to remove racist comments from its magazine. Another petition calls for travel insurance companies to stop discriminating against people with certain mental health conditions. Travel visa-related petitions are also very common on the site.

Individual acts of travel-related social media activism that target change in the behavior of other tourists can take on many forms but typically involve users either commenting on other users' posts, policing their actions and informing them of their wrongdoings or praising and encouraging positive actions, or posting about their own cause-related actions, e.g. refraining from using certain travel providers, not traveling to certain destinations or traveling to destinations to support them, engaging in voluntourism, or offsetting the environmental costs of the trip.

Digital detox vacations (Neuhofer & Ladkin, 2017; Dickinson, Hibbert& Filimonau, 2016; Paris et al., 2015; Pearce & Gretzel, 2012) can also be seen as a form of consumer resistance and can be conceptualized as a form of social media activism as going on a digital detox vacation is usually prominently announced on social media. While mostly an individual action that aims at differentiating oneself from others and therefore is individualizing according

to Kozinets and Handelman (1998), it also fits with their boycotting as transformative behavior form of social media activism. Although the hashtag #facebooksabbatical on Twitter suggests that consumers engage in this form of resistance on a regular basis, e.g. a Twitter user writes in February of 2016: *"Goodbye, Facebook. It's been fun, but I'm tired of people. #facebooks abbatical"*, vacations can provide the necessary impetus and context to facilitate digital detox boycotts.

Conclusion

Much of what we know about consumer activism has been conceptualized with respect to regular consumer decisions pertaining to immediate, familiar consumption environments. The tourism-related case studies suggest that a tourism specific perspective is needed to truly understand social media activism in tourism contexts. Especially individual forms of activism are currently not well understood, and especially not as they pertain to tourism-related consumption. The motivations for consumers to refrain from consuming travel, which is an integral element of many consumers' identity and quality of life (Dolnicar, Yanamandram& Cliff, 2012), to side with residents or employees in far-away destinations, to join unknown others in movements whose causes may have very little impact on their own tourism consumption, and to take actions against companies they do not interact with regularly need to be investigated. The high involvement, high risk and often international aspects of tourism consumption that leave tourists with very little opportunity to legally or politically voice their opinions makes social media activism a particularly important topic in tourism, yet systematic studies on its forms, reach, emergence, longevity, success rates, or results are currently lacking from the literature. While Mkono and Tribe (2017) identify being an activist as an important role of touristic consumers using social media, their conceptualization of activism and their research context are narrow and thus neglect many dimensions of social media activism relevant to tourism. The link to sustainable tourism and social media activism's potential to positively influence tourism consumption also needs further exploration (Murphy et al., 2018).

Given the increased reliance of tourism providers and destinations on their online reputation (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2011), it is critical for them to not only understand what drives social media activism in order to avoid or effectively manage it. It seems that many tourism providers are still oblivious to the power of social media in helping consumers voice criticism and organize against company or destination interests. While some monitor their ratings on platforms like TripAdvisor, many do not engage in sophisticated social media

listening (Gretzel et al., 2017) and are not aware of all the forms social media activism can take. While some literature exists on effective complaint management for tourism providers (e.g. Sparks & Bradley, 2014), more research is needed on firm-consumer relationships in the age of social media activism and on effective management techniques. For instance, the research by Hardy et al. (2013) suggests that social media activism calls for more flexible and integrative approaches to stakeholder management in tourism.

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