Travel Information Sources among United Arab Emirates Travellers

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Abstract
Travel information sources play an essential role in the travel decision- making process. The goal of this study is to investigate the most frequently used information sources by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) travellers and to define the influence of travellers' socio-demographic characteristics on their search behaviour. The study employed a cross-sectional descriptive survey to achieve this goal. The survey was developed and conducted in Dubai, the second biggest city in the UAE. Data analysis revealed that UAE travellers depend on the internet as the major source for travel information followed by social media (SM) and personal experience. The study findings also suggest that travel agents' services still sought by the UAE travellers as a trustworthy source of information. Google and YouTube were found to be the most popular online search engines while Instagram and Snapchat represent the most prevailing SM applications pursued for travel information. The study results confirmed the growing significance of SM as a reliable source of travel information and the challenges faced by traditional providers of travel-related information. Implications for tourism marketers in terms of online marketing strategies were discussed.

Keywords: UAE Arab travellers, information sources, internet, travel agents, social media.

Introduction

Understanding information search behaviour has been one of the most widely studied issues in the tourism field in recent decades (Bargeman and van der Poel, 2006; Fodness and Murray, 1997; Gartner, 1993; Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 1995; Hwang, Y., Jani, D. & Jeong, H. 2013; Ho, C., Lin, M. & Chen, H., 2012; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Raitz and Dakhil, 1989; Riera, Ruiz, Zarco & Yusta, 2015; Sirakaya and Woodside, 2004; Vich-i-Martorell, 2003). Most studies focused on examining tourism information search behaviour, both theoretically and empirically. The former studies tried to identify the most frequently used information sources by tourists at different stages in the decision-making process.

Many of the previous studies examined the sources of tourist information that tourists rely on in many parts of the world, but there is a clear lack of studies that examined this matter among the Gulf travellers, especially from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Outbound travel market from UAE is very promising and lucrative. The UAE is among the top 20 travel markets in the world, in terms of international travel expenditure. UAE travellers spent USD 17.1 billion in 2016 on international travel (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission, 2018). Therefore, the goal of this study is to investigate the most frequently used information sources by UAE travellers and to define the influence of an individual's socio-demographic characteristics on their search behaviour. Such data is of significant interest to Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and tourist services' suppliers wishing to increase their share from this lucrative market.

The UAE outbound travel market

The average income of citizens in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is ranked among the top 40 countries in the world. High oil revenues and the small population are the forces of this high income. According to The World Bank statistics in 2017, UAE came second after Qatar as the highest in GDP per capita among all Middle East countries. The fast and huge economic development projects in GCC countries has also increased the incomes not just for their nationals but also for the expatriates living and working in these countries. In the United Arab Emirates, the expatriates represent more than (80%) of the total population in 2016 (The Official portal of The UAE Government, accessed November 2018). With high economic resources, the travellers of these countries are able to spend more on lavish products, entertainment and travel. Therefore, nowadays, destinations worldwide consider GCC tourists one of their most important target segments (Tourism Organization and European Travel Commission, 2012).

In 2015, outbound tourism exceeded the 8 million trips, reflecting a positive growth at an average annual rate of 8% since 2009 (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission, 2018).

International tourism expenditure

The UAE is among the top 20 travel markets in the world, in terms of international travel spend. International travel expenditure by UAE residents has increased dramatically between 2000-2016 as shown in Table 1. UAE international tourism expenditure totalled USD 17.1 billion in 2016, rising exponentially from USD 6.2 billion in 2005 (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission, 2018).

Table 1: United Arab Emirates: tourism expenditure (USD million)

	2000	2005	2010	2014	2015	2016
Total expenditure	3,019	6,186	11,818	17,740	16,600	17,100

Source: World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission, 2018.

Major outbound destinations for UAE travellers

Apart from the intra-regional destinations, the UAE outbound travel to Europe has sustained an average annual growth rate of 10% during the period 2010–2015. The most popular European destinations among UAE travellers are United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain and Turkey. Travel operators have also reported a rise in travel interest among UAE travellers in destinations such as Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Cyprus, Poland and the Czech Republic. In regards to Asia and the Pacific, the main destinations for UAE travellers are Thailand, Iran, India, Singapore and Australia. In the Americas, the main destination visited by United Arab Emirates travellers is the United States of America followed by Canada (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission, 2018).

Travel information sources

The information-processing theory states that the consumer decision-making process comprises five main stages: (1) problem recognition, (2) information search, (3) alternative evaluation and selection, (4) outlet selection and purchase, and (5) post-purchase processes (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 1995). Hence, to take a purchase decision, the buyer needs to collect information, evaluates different alternatives, narrow down the range of possible choices before taking the final purchase decision. The same theory applies to travel decision. Literature shows how the information sources consulted impact the tourists' motivations to visit a destination. They refer to different information sources to decide and plan their trip (Riera, Ruiz, Zarco & Yusta, 2015). Other studies suggest that consumers collect information mainly to reduce uncertainty and/or risks associated with the trip in addition to increase the travel efficiency (Hwang, Jani, & Jeong, 2013)

Generally, tourism information sources are categorized into two types: internal and external. The internal sources are the traveller's knowledge accumulated through an ongoing search process and past experience either with the same or a similar destination. The external sources represent the basic sources such as unbiased (e.g. tourist offices, travel guides), commercial (e.g. travel agents, brochures), social (friends & relatives), and mass media (e.g. newspapers, radio, TV, internet) (Bargeman and van der Poel, 2006; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012).

Studies support that there is a strong reverse relationship between past experience and the customer need for the information search. In other words, when past experience increases, the information search is supposed to decrease. The opposite is totally true, when the internal sources are not enough to take a decision, then the traveller will seek external information sources (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Sirakaya and Woodside, 2004).

Raitz and Dakhil (1989) classify information sources as formal and informal. According to Raitz and Dakhil (1989), formal information sources differ substantially in their purpose as they are designed to express a uniform message about the quality of a destination or an environment. This information is used by advertising businesses to build a positive image of tourist destinations and thus attract travellers. On the other hand, an informal search involves word-of-mouth communication with friends and relatives.

Alternatively, Fodness and Murray (1997) suggest that information sources can be classified depending on the nature of its source whether it is commercial, non-commercial, or received through personal or impersonal communication. Gartner (1993) classified tourism information sources about tourism into induced, autonomous and organic. Induced sources are those controlled by the DMO and the travel stakeholders. The autonomous sources are those that are spread through mass media, travel guides or films; and organic ones are those that are transmitted by friends and contacts.

Internet and social media

In the early 90s, the internet was developed as a new source of information and communication. All the previously mentioned sources of information are present on the Internet. Identification of customer needs and direct contact with consumers are the key to internet success. The Internet offers customers comprehensive, relatively low cost, up-to-date information, customised information, ease of product comparison, interactivity, virtual community formation, and 24-h accessibility. All these advantages of using Web search give potential travellers the means to choose, purchase, and plan their own itineraries at any place and time (Ho, Lin, & Chen, 2012; Vich-i-Martorell, 2003).

Research has shown that people who book travel services online tend to utilise Web sources more intensively. It has been found that younger tourists particularly make intensive use of Internet-based networks and this is why they are called the Net generation and digital natives (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012)

The internet has dramatically transformed the tourism business either as a source of information or as sales and booking channel. Travellers' reviews, photographs, videos, stories and recommendations and online marketing are giving potential visitors more real and vivid image about the destinations (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2015). Distinctive features of the internet in terms of accessibility, convenience, real-time information, interactive communications and low cost make it a unique information source (Bonn et al., 1999; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012).

The internet, and especially SM, has changed radically the ways of communication between organizations and the individuals. Internet has empowered the customers. Customers not only can pursue and attain information from diverse sources, but also, they can create new contents, express their opinions and share information and experiences. On top of all this, SM tools enabled people to criticize and rank the online content (Dickey and Lewis, 2011, Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2015).

Those new sources where the traveller is at the same time creator and consumer of information and contents are known as Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) or the user-generated content (UGC). The Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) could be defined as "all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers" (Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis, 2013, p.23). The Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) or User-Generated-Content (UGC) transfer through a group of Internet-based applications (Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis, 2013).

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) or the user-generated content (UGC) provides comprehensive, empirical and up-to-date information. This source of information has a high degree of credibility among travellers as hypothetically are non-commercial and created without targeting any kind of profit (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Riera, Ruiz, Zarco & Yusta, 2015).

Methodology

Defining travel information sources among UE Arab travellers is the main objective of this study. To achieve this, a cross-sectional descriptive survey was conducted in which respondents were asked to define the relative significance of all travel information sources. These elements were drawn from the former literature (Riera, Ruiz, Zarco & Yusta, 2015; Bargeman and van der Poel, 2006; Dickey and Lewis, 2011; Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis, 2013).

UAE urban travellers, both locals and Arab expatriates were the target population for the survey. The questionnaire was written in Arabic language to suit the potential sample. Respondents were randomly approached in the food courts of one of the biggest shopping malls in Dubai; Mirdif City Center over several days in May 2018.

The survey consists of five parts. The first part was about the demographic features of the respondents (age, gender, education, social status and income). The second part was about the travel frequency. The respondents were asked to state how many times in average they travel every year. This question was needed to make sure that the respondents are active travellers and eligible for the survey. In part three, the respondents were asked to state the relative importance of different sources of information, i.e. the internet, word of mouth and SM, personal experience, travel agents, radio and TV on a five-point Linkert-type scale with "1" indicated Least significant to "5" Most significant. The fourth part of the survey, respondents were asked to state the SM applications that have profiles on. In the last part of the survey, respondents were asked to identify the most visited internet websites and SM applications to plan their vacations and to rank them in the right order according to their importance.

A total of 421 valid questionnaires were collected. To interpret the collected data, all the 421 questionnaires were coded for analysis using the SPSS program.

Data analysis and findings

Demographic features of respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 2. Having youth as a big share of the sample is a good point in this survey as youth aged 15-34 represented 41.7% of the total local population in 2017 (The official data portal of the UAE, 2017). Besides, youth travel represents a very strong segment among the UAE Arab travellers (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission, 2018).

Table 2: Respondents' demographics

Characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Age	18 -34	329	78.1
	35 -54	90	21.9
Gender	man	170	40.4
	woman	251	59.6
Nationality	citizen	277	65.8
	expat	144	34.2
Education	high school	63	15.0
	some college	174	41.3
	college graduate	145	34.4
	post graduate studies	39	9.3
Social status	single	240	57.0
	married without kids	47	11.2
	married with kids	134	31.8
Income	10.000 -20.000 AED	172	40.9
	21.000 - 30.000 AED	101	24.0
	31.000 - 40.000 AED	64	15.2
	41.000 - 50.000 AED	37	8.8
	51.000+ AED	47	11.2

Table 2 also shows the relatively high income of respondents which increase the desirability of travel and makes this market more lucrative for destinations and travel suppliers.

Travel frequency

As presented in Table 3, checking the frequency of travel for survey respondents showed that they were active travellers and favorably fit for the study.

Table 3: Travel Frequency

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	48	11.4	12.0	12.0
	1.00	211	50.1	52.9	64.9
	2.00	106	25.2	26.6	91.5
	3.00	34	8.1	8.5	100.0
	Total	399	94.8	100.0	
Missing		22	5.2		
Total		421	100.0		

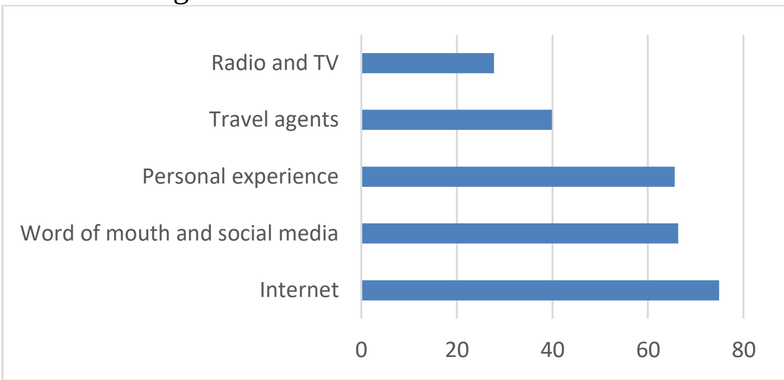
Information sources

When asking about the significance of different information sources that respondents use to decide and plan for holidays, findings revealed that about 75% of the respondents depend on the internet as the key source of travel information followed by SM and the personal experience with almost the same level of significance. Travel agents came in the third level while mass media (Newspapers, Radio and TV) came last. See Table 4. and Figure 1.

Table 4: Sources of travel information

Source of Information	N	Most significant (5)	Significant (4)	Total (4) + (5)	%
Internet	421	212	103	315	74.9
Social media	421	159	120	279	66.3
Personal experience	421	147	129	276	65.6
Travel agents	421	93	75	168	39.9
Newspapers, Radio and TV	421	56	61	117	27.8

Figure 1: Sources of travel information



The respondents' choice of SM after the internet as the second source of travel information demonstrates their need for more private reliable information after doing their basic search. Moreover, since travel products are very costly and lack the privilege of pre-trial, this personal knowledge communicated by peers who do not have commercial interests is considered particularly valuable (Yoo et al., 2011). Previous studies found that the reviews of friends and other travellers, are at least three times more trusted than traditional means of communication, such as travel agencies, advertising in mass media, etc. and almost 7 in 10 persons trust the recommendations of other users in SM for their information concerning a trip (Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis, 2013). Thereafter, 168 respondents (approximately 40%) rated travel agents as important source of travel information. They mentioned they visit both the real agencies and their websites such as Al Rostamani and Danata Travel.

Respondents added in their notes that they tend to depend more on the services of travel agents when travelling to new and faraway destinations. Some of them added that services of travel agents are particularly sought when visiting a destination for the first time, especially if it is a western country with minority of Muslim people. In such cases, they prefer to restore to a travel agent to customize a full packaged trip with all Muslim special services such as Halal food meals, family conservative hotels and farcicalities, etc.

Finally, newspapers, magazines television and radio, were chosen by 117 persons (28%) as significant source of information. This finding is somehow surprising and shows that mass media still plays a relatively important role in promoting tourism in UAE.

When testing information sources significance by age group, the results showed that the older age group generally give higher rate to all sources of information than the younger age group except with respect to mass communication.
This can be explained by the fact that older clients are more cautious than young people in making the travel decision and therefore tend to collect more information on tourist destinations before taking the decision to travel. Young tourists are bolder and more adventurous and often spend less time collecting information and making a decision to travel, see Table 5.

Table 5: Information sources significance by age group

Responses by Age group (significance of inf. source)		Internet	Social media	Personal travel experience	Travel agents	Radio and TV
18 -34	Mean	4.09	3.84	3.82	3.10	2.80
	Significant + very significant (4+5)	73.3%	64%	64.8%	38.9%	27.7%
35 -54	Mean	4.24	4.07	3.90	3.19	2.69
	Significant + very significant (4+5)	80%	73.3%	66.8%	43.3%	16.7%

In regards to to gender, the results show no difference between male and female respondents in their perception of the information sources significance, see Table 6.

Table 6: Information sources significance by gender

Responses by Gender (significance of inf. source)		Internet	Social media	Personal travel experience	Travel agents	Radio and TV
Men	Mean	4.11	3.89	3.82	3.12	2.75
	Significant + very significant (4+5)	75.3%	68.3%	67%	40.6%	27%
Women	Mean	4.14	3.89	3.85	3.12	2.80
	Significant + very significant (4+5)	74.5%	64.9%	64.6%	39.4%	28%

When comparing the significance rates given to information sources by UAE nationals and expatriates, very similar results were revealed. This means that both citizens and expatriates perceive travel information sources equally, see Table 7.

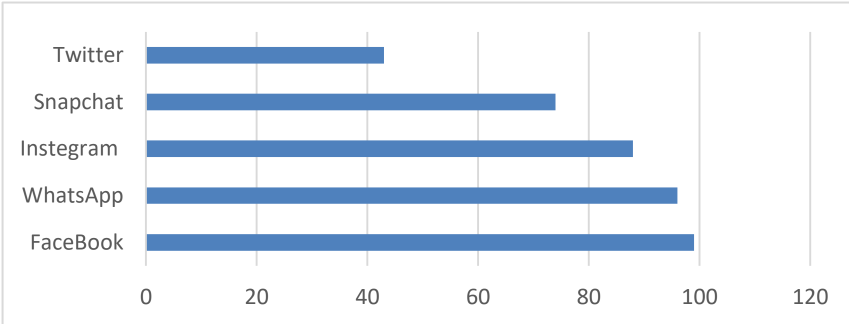
Table 7. Information sources significance by Nationality

Responses by Nationality (significance of inf. source)		Internet	Social media	Personal travel experience	Travel agents	Radio and TV
Citizens	Mean	4.15	3.85	3.79	3.19	2.81
	Significant + very significant (4+5)	74.7%	65%	64.6%	41%	29%
Expats	Mean	4.07	3.98	3.93	2.98	2.74
	Significant + very significant (4+5)	75%	68.8%	67.4%	37.5%	25%

Respondents' relationship with SM

In the fourth part of the survey, respondents were asked to state the SM applications that they have profiles on. The majority of respondents tend to have more than one account profile in SM. From the sample of 421respondents, 99% has a Facebook account, 96% has WhatsApp, 88 % has Instagram, 74% has Snapchat and 43% has Twitter, see Figure 2. People tend to have more than one SM account because of the variety of SM applications features, such as the content, the needs that cover, the services offered and the media of communication or interaction. It is worth mentioning that many respondents noted that they might have a profile on many SM applications, however, they are not active on all of them.

Figure 2. Respondents relationship with SM



When respondents were asked to specify the internet websites and SM applications that they often use as sources for travel information, Google and YouTube came on the top of the list. Some respondents mentioned that they first search destinations on google, then refer to the YouTube for more information. They added that they follow some famous bloggers on YouTube who publish videos for their travel experiences.

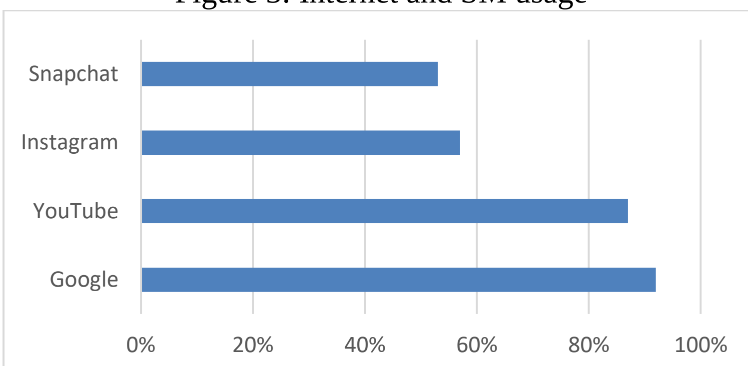
Afterward, as per the SM applications used for travel information, the vast majority of respondents mentioned Instagram and Snapchat. Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter were rarely considered as significant information travel sources (Table 8, Figure 3).

Table 8. Internet and SM usage as travel information source

	Internet Information source	Respondents' usage rate
1	Google	92%
2	YouTube	87%
3	Instagram	57%
4	Snapchat	53%

Considering a question about visiting the pages of National Tourism Organizations (NTO), which designed to promote destinations online, only 3% of respondents replied positively.

Figure 3: Internet and SM usage



In respect to travel guide websites such as Make My Trip, Skyscanner, Lonely planet and SmarterTravel, the analysis showed they are totally unknown to the majority of the participants.

Conclusions and recommendations

Tourism represents a major source of revenue to many destinations. Though, changes in the customers' adoption of media and technology require changes in destinations′ communications strategy and the way they market themselves in the worldwide market. Embracing of new media and technologies is vital for survival. Nowadays, people's everyday life is affected by internet and SM. World had shifted from being held by tourism services' suppliers and consumed by the customers, to a world where the information is held, directed to and consumed by customers. As SM networking is getting more dominant every day, tourism suppliers need to position themselves online and on the SM world to reach the potential travellers. Instead of traditional methods of marketing through mass media channels, tourism marketers need to create more spaces for customers to exchange views, advice, and audio-visual material to attract the potential traveller.

In addition, NTOs and travel guide websites need to strengthen their marketing campaigns via SM. They need to consider SM as a major promotional tool and to invest more in them. SM give destinations the privilege to contact potential travellers at moderately low cost and much higher levels of efficiency than traditional ways of communication can achieve. If the destination wants to compete on the highly aggressive global tourism market, it must be distinctive from the competitors. Focusing on SM will make the destination successfully visible. However, since the SM is overloaded and flooded with information, new schemes are truly needed to attract the attention of the customer such as novelty, chance to win, celebrity involvement, uniqueness and interesting graphical design. SM can help destinations to stand out if they use interesting, creative content and stimulate interactive communication.

Until recently, the travel agent was the travellers' first choice as a travel consultant because of the personal contact with customers. Now, the UAE travellers prefer to obtain information about their destination from other customers who have already visited the place, as their views are believed to be unbiased by commercial interests. Afterwards, a considerable part of them turn to travel agents to plan and book their holidays. Though, travel agents need to adapt to and embrace the new technologies, otherwise, their previous position in tourism market would gradually tend to weaken.

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