PolyU Study Finds Internet Travel Planning at
Saturation Point in US

Use of the Internet for travel planning in the US market has reached saturation point but there are still opportunities for growth, according to Dr Dan Wang of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and her co-researchers. In a recent study the researchers reveal the changing trends in the use of the Internet for travel planning, with a growing "bifurcation" between traditional users who use it for "standard planning" and those who are increasingly using it to search for products that offer "deeper and more authentic experiences". They also identify a number of ways that businesses can improve their services to accommodate travellers' changing needs and expectations.

The Internet has brought about huge changes to our economic and social lives in the twenty years since it was first commercialised, the researchers argue. Along with many other industries, the travel and tourism industry was quick to adopt the Internet as a "new distribution channel" and "advertising medium". Consumers have benefitted from the emergence of numerous online travel agencies, which offer direct access to travel products and the ability to compare prices, interact directly with businesses and exchange opinions with other customers online.

The Internet has also continued to evolve and alter the way we interact with it, the researchers suggest. While it was once a platform for publishing and searching for information, it is now a space for user interaction and participation. Apart from the vast amounts of information that are now available, the growth of social media websites has "changed the dynamics of online communications", and smartphones allow travellers to search and exchange information "on the go".

Nevertheless, the researchers claim that we still know surprisingly little about "how travel planning has evolved" alongside these technological developments. They point out that development is a dynamic process, whereby improvements in services are "driven by the needs and wants" of travellers themselves. Understanding how users adapt is important, because such knowledge is critical in helping travel and tourism businesses to "identify and develop effective communication strategies".

To understand how travellers' use of the Internet has evolved, the researchers collected data through a multi-year Internet survey. The respondents were all from the US, and were representative of the American population in terms of age, ethnicity and gender.

Each year, the respondents were asked a variety of questions about various aspects of their travel. They were initially asked how many trips they had taken during the previous year and whether those trips were for business or leisure. They were then asked whether they had used the Internet to plan their trips and, if so, what type of websites they used, what information they searched for and whether they had made

payments and reservations online. Next, they were asked to evaluate their experiences in terms of their satisfaction and how useful they found the Internet for travel planning.

In each year of the survey, the travellers indicated that the Internet was their number one source for travel planning. Even more notably, there was little change in the percentage of travellers using it for this purpose over that time. This, the researchers note, suggests that Internet adoption has reached saturation amongst the American population, although the number of people using it for all rather than some of their travel planning has increased by almost 50%. With the use of traditional sources such as guidebooks in decline, travellers appear to be "very technology dependent in seeking and preparing for" their trips.

The researchers also found that travellers have become increasingly satisfied with their experience of using the Internet for travel planning. Travellers not only found the Internet more useful than ever, but also reported improvements in aspects such as "security, trust and personalised services". They attribute these findings to information providers' "improved knowledge of website design, strengthened security measures, and increasingly sophisticated strategies to offer personalised products and services".

Although overall use of the Internet has reached saturation, there have been some changes in the products that users search for and purchase through the Internet. Apart from accommodation and air tickets, which have long been popular online purchases, the researchers note that travellers increasingly buy experiential products such as "museum tickets, shopping, and dining". Another trend identified is that the use of traditional media such as TV, newspapers and magazines, radio and movies has increased in recent years, as travellers are "consciously seeking a variety of information" to help them form "a more comprehensive, less biased judgement of the targeted travel products".

With no increase in the number of people adopting the Internet for travel planning, the researchers predict that competition for hospitality and tourism business will become "more intense". However, there are opportunities for growth in the sale of secondary products such as "dining, shopping and ticketing services", and businesses also need to identify new strategies to meet the growing demand for "authentic products and experiences".

The researchers reveal that social media and photo-sharing sites "are generating enormous influence on travel planning" as travellers increasingly rely on the comments and materials posted online by other travellers. Another major change is the huge increase in the adoption of smartphones and the availability of the Internet anywhere, at any time. Although the use of desktop computers fell considerably amongst the surveyed travellers, the use of tablets rose by 200%. The researchers suggest that availability of GPS on mobile devices also means that people are now less likely to use the Internet for printing out maps and driving directions before a trip.

Perhaps more importantly, the researchers found that travellers are spending less time searching for "information about a particular destination" once they have decided where to visit. Although this is still one of the "top priorities" for travellers, it seems that searching for information before arriving at a destination is less important now that such information can be easily accessed during the trip.

Interestingly, however, searching for information about "potential" destinations has actually increased. The researchers claim that the ease of accessing the Internet has altered the traditional "rigid trip planning process" so that it is has become "much more open, fluid and fragmented".

The changes in travellers' trip planning behaviour may present a "significant challenge" for destination marketing organisations, the researchers argue. To meet this challenge, such organisations should "re-establish their online identity by offering more relevant and competitive services" and by shifting their focus toward supporting businesses that "directly connect to the visitor".

Overall, the researchers show that the Internet has evolved to become more "traveller-oriented". They commend the tourism industry for responding positively to various technological changes and "adopting a new paradigm that embraces innovation led by travellers' co-creation activities". This, they conclude, means that the Internet now offers both travellers and the tourism industry the means "to realise a future only imagined a few years ago".

Xiang, Zheng, Wang, Dan, O'Leary, Joseph T and Fesenmaier, Daniel R. (2015). Adapting to the Internet: Trends in Travelers' Use of the Web for Trip Planning. *Journal of Travel Research*, 54(4), 511-527.

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Press contact   :   Ms Pauline Ngan, Senior Marketing Manager
                         School of Hotel and Tourism Management

Telephone   :   (852) 3400 2634

E-mail   :   pauline.ngan@polyu.edu.hk

Website   :   www.polyu.edu.hk/htm