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Social Media Use among Winery Tasting Room Visitors

By

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the utilization of internet platforms, applications, and various computing

devices by visitors to winery tasting rooms when planning their trips. The research drew upon

the theoretical foundations of Consumer Behavior Theory and the Consumer Purchase Decision

Model. An online survey was administered to tasting room visitors at 20 wineries located in the

American Southwest. The findings were categorized into three distinct phases of tourism

planning: pre-travel, during-travel, and post-travel. The results revealed that tasting room visitors

relied extensively on smartphones, nearly at par with laptops/desktop computers, for their travel

planning and booking needs.

Introduction

The rural population of the United States has been steadily declining in recent years due to the

diminishing traditional industries such as manufacturing, mining, forestry, fishing, and

agriculture production, as indicated by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2015. Over the past half-century, a significant portion of this population has migrated from rural areas to metropolitan centers, as highlighted in the 2010 U.S. Census. This demographic shift has resulted in economic challenges for many rural communities, compelling them to explore novel approaches to stimulate their economies, enhance community attractiveness, and attract both business owners and young families to settle in rural regions, as discussed by Dimitri et al. in 2005. One promising solution that has emerged is the development of agricultural tourism.

The growth of agricultural tourism can play a pivotal role in fostering economic development within these communities by promoting the consumption of local products and the provision of various services, as noted by Wargenau and Che in 2006. Specifically, wineries that offer on-site tasting rooms can serve as valuable tourist destinations, as suggested by Carmichael in 2005. In emerging wine regions, many wineries rely heavily on revenue generated from tourists visiting their tasting rooms.

The significance of this research lies in its focus on wineries and their pivotal role as destinations for agricultural tourism. A winery's tasting room serves as a distinctive agricultural tourism attraction, generating employment opportunities through the provision of services and the sale of products. The stronger and more sustainable wineries become, the greater their capacity to contribute to the local economy's growth. Wine tourism can serve as a catalyst for economic expansion within communities, as wine tourists often explore other local attractions in addition to visiting tasting rooms, as emphasized by Wargenau and Che in 2006.

Increased tourism visitation increases social opportunities for visitors as well as regional consumers through social and/or cultural experiences, personal development, and interactivity

(Anwar & Sohail, 2004). Consequently, it is necessary for winery owners and destination marketers to enhance existing traditional marketing strategies (brochures, billboards, and advertisements) to encourage on-site tasting room sales to consumers (Lynch & Horton, 2002). More importantly, winery owners should examine and develop online technology based marketing plans, to further promote their business.

In the past fifteen years, the number of people using the Internet has increased from 122 million users to over 300 million users in the United States (World Bank, 2015). Rapid technological advances continue to influence consumers, including their travel planning (Lou et al., 2005). Online marketing is an ever present force that lures, informs, and often pressures people when making their travel choices. When approximately 95% of Internet users rely on information from the web as part of their travel information search process, according to Cox, et al. (2009), it becomes extremely important for destination marketers and business owners to understand how mobile technology and the devices used impact travelers.

The results of this study may assist winery owners to more effectively market winery tasting rooms to a wider population. This will in turn enhance local agriculture tourism visitation, increase economic development, and create more employment opportunities for young people and families in rural areas. Additionally, improved tourism attendance will increase social opportunities for both the visitor as well as the local residents (Anwar & Sohail, 2004).

The consumer process of selecting destinations and planning travel is typically based on the five-stage consumer purchase model (Engel et al., 1968), which includes: need recognition; information search; evaluation of alternatives; purchase decision; and post-purchase behavior. In a tourism context, these stages are often classified into pre-travel, during travel, and post-travel

phases (Cox et al., 2009). Recent research by Karanasios, Sellitto, & Burgess, (2015) illustrates tourism research specifically focused on use of mobile technology, which further demonstrates the planning process of tourists using technology during the three stages of trip planning (Figure 1.).
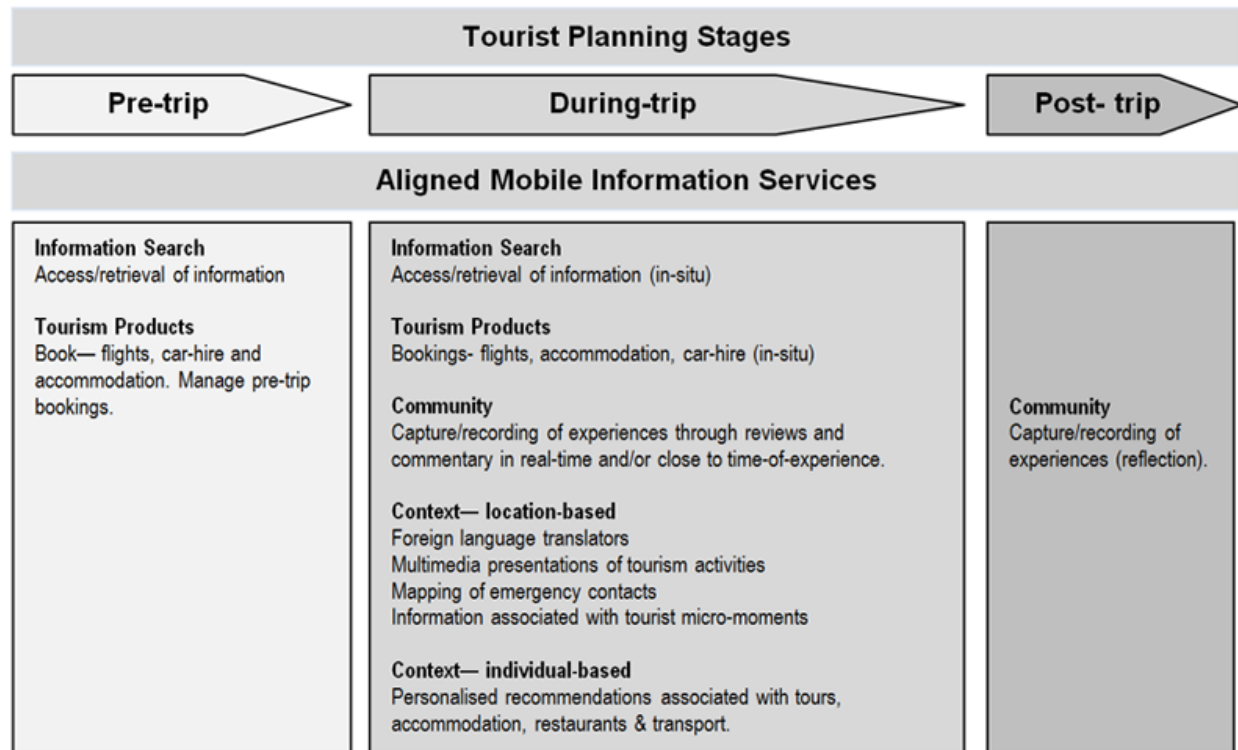

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework, Tourist Planning Stages (Karanasios, et al., 2015)

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