

MASTER THESIS

IMPACT OF SOCIAL TRAVEL NETWORKS ON TRAVEL PLANNING:

THE CASE OF TRIPADVISOR

FACULTY OF ECONOMICS UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA SLOVENIA

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INTRODUCTION

"Those who fail to plan, plan to fail" – an age old proverb, confirms its validity among travelers who do not engage in efficient travel planning. Indeed travel planning is a complex process which requires a considerable investment of time and money. However, it is important for travelers to have relevant, quality and current information about travel products, services and destinations to make such an investment. Travelers without resourceful planning, often times find themselves stranded in a foreign land, accept poor quality products and services, or suffer great mental stress (Bonsall, 2004).

Traditionally, individuals who desired to travel would consult a travel agent. It was the travel agent who would organize transportation, along with accommodation and on occasion meals. However, the variety of choices were limited as each travel agent had contracts with only a handful of suppliers. By contrast travel today is a multifarious concoction of options, where a traveler must scrutinize among the clutter of travel related products and services in order to create memories of a lifetime. Moreover with hundreds of airlines, thousands of hotels and millions of restaurants to choose from across the globe, travel planning has turned into a daunting task. However traveling today is much easier than before. Ode to the invention of jet fuel and airplane, improved diplomatic relationship among nations, credit cards and global exchange rates, travelers can now easily travel to almost anywhere in the world.

Tourism and technology are slowly progressing towards a common future (Sheldon, 1997). Indeed, Sheldon was correct when she prophesized such a future. Technology advancements in tourism today has replaced travel agents with online travel agencies, boarding passes with scan able codes on mobile phones, paper city guides with applications on smart internet connected devices and so on. Furthermore, as technology progressed over the past decade, and improved the availability of information, it became easier for internet users to explore and find information on the web. Tourism and travel marketing experts also cashed in on this opportunity and flooded the internet with flashy advertisements which would entice travelers to purchase a particular product or service. Thus a wide spectrum of confusing travel related information was available to travel lovers. However, with the introduction of Web 2.0, there has been a shift in such a paradigm.

Technology and tourism has fused to provide travelers with support and guidance in their travel planning. Once where word of mouth was enough, today the paradigm has shifted to cyber echoes from alien well-wishers. Travel marketers are not the only source of information anymore, as travelers themselves are now sharing valuable information with the world from their own travels. Travelers are now creating information and knowledge about their prior travels and swiftly dispensing such information over the web. Others are making use of such available information to plan their own travels (Xiang & Gretzel,

2010). A symbiotic network of information creators and receptors has been established though the use of web 2.0 information communication technologies.

The world's largest social network, Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) who boasted a massive 1.35 billion active users on its network in the beginning of October 2014 (Facebook, 2014); and TripAdvisor (http://www.tripadvisor.com) the leading travel website in the world with over 170 million reviews (TripAdvisor, 2014) have merged their capabilities to form a social travel network (hereinafter STN). The power of this cooperation ought to have either a substantial positive or negative influence on the travelers travel plans. However very little research is available in current literature about the impact of STNs on travel planning. Let alone studies about STN, the term 'social travel network' itself is scarce in current literature. Leung, Law, van Hoof, and Buhalis (2013) mentioned that even though there is wide adoption of social media among tourism consumers and suppliers, there is a clear lack in understanding the proper use of such information among both tourism practitioners and scholars.

While some admirable research is available on role of consumer generated media in travel information search (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013a; Cox, Burgess, Sellitto & Buultjens, 2009; Noone, McGuire, & Rohlfs, 2011; Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), use of the internet and search engines such as Google for travel planning (Bonn, Furr, & Susskind, 1998; Fesenmaier, Xiang, Pan, & Law, 2010), impact of online reviews and their use (Gretzel, & Yoo, 2008); users' motivations for sharing information on social media, electronic word of mouth and trustworthiness of online information (Dickinger, 2010; Filieri, & McLeay, 2013; Munar, & Jacobsen, 2014). There still remains a huge void in current literature in pulling these various information routes together and understanding it holistically. This research helps to fill the gap by exploring what a STN is and the impact of such a network on travel planning.

Since this dissertation is primarily about an information technology service in tourism, the primary theories that are used to answer the question are Davis's technology acceptance model (hereinafter TAM) (Davis, 1989) and Sussman and Siegal's information adoption model (hereinafter IAM) (Sussman & Siegal 2003). In addition, the integration TAM and IAM in the same research model appears ideal, in that both theories take their roots in Fishbein and Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), and serve well in this dissertation to understand the impact of STNs on travel planning.

TAM is widely acknowledged and used by scholars in technology to conduct research about the adoption of technology. The model is also well established in e-Tourism, marketing and information systems literature related to technology acceptance and predicting user's adoption of a new technology (Chuttur, 2009; Eriksson & Strandvik 2009; Legris, Ingham, & Collerette, 2003).

Due to the lack of TAM alone to justify the use and acceptance of information from STN, this paper also draws on Sussman and Siegal's (2003) information adoption model which help better understand users' motivation towards using information. The IAM along with TAM can help establish what motivates users to adopt information from a social travel network.

Therefore after logical analysis of the scenarios presented and with the help of these two theories, the primary aim of this thesis is to answer the following research question:

"What impact does TripAdvisor, as a social travel network have on the travel planning process?

The thesis primarily focuses on TripAdvisor as a STN due to its recent corporation with Facebook. TripAdvisor and Facebook have created an ecosystem where travelers from various walks of life, can source, share, and contribute travel related information. TripAdvisor has evolved from just a mere website where travelers could post reviews to a STN with a variety of social features. To explore the impact of such a network, empirical research is undertaken in this dissertation.

The first chapter of this paper introduces to the reader relevant literature about the evolution of tourism from its early days to the modern connected world. Ideas about how travel planning is done through the use of information and communication technologies and social networking sites are discussed. This chapter also presents an in depth understanding of TAM and IAM. A working definition for social travel networks is also presented in this chapter due to the lack of one in current literature.

Following the first chapter, the second chapter states the hypotheses and presents the constructs that have an impact on the behavioral intention to use information by travelers. The research model for the dissertation is also introduced in this section. The third chapter is devoted to the case of TripAdvisor. Details about the company and services provided are discussed to help the reader understand the scope of TripAdvisor in travel planning.

The fourth chapter follows with details about the methodology undertaken in this dissertation. The research paradigm is presented and data collection method is particularized upon.

The fifth chapter then presents the research findings along with the structural equation model. All hypotheses are elaborated upon, based on the findings, and a sincere discussion is provided taking into consideration the reality of the tourism industry today. This chapter also describes the contributions of the research for both theory and practice. In addition the author also reflects upon the limitations of this dissertation and provides

recommendations for future research in the area of STNs before concluding the dissertation.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Tourism and Tourist

"Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes" (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2014).

The above definition of tourism has been established by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (hereinafter UNWTO). Tourism is complex and requires a holistic approach to comprehend it, and defining it unambiguously is impossible (Leiper, 1979).



Figure 1: Tourism System Model

As demonstrated in Figure 1, Leiper (1979) had arranged the elements of tourism into spatial and functional connections. The tourist departs from the tourist generating region, travels through the transit area to the destination and back. He concluded that the tourism industry is located in all regions where there are tourists. Thus, the tourism industry can be defined to contain all the products and services where a significant amount of the expenditure is made by tourists (UNWTO, 2014). All the previous elements are surrounded by the environmental elements such as cultural, political and technological (Leiper, 1979). Furthermore, Buhalis (2003) developed upon Leiper's model by adding supporting industries namely infrastructure, telecommunication, legislations, hospitals, and police; outside the tourism industry in the destination region. Without the help of these supporting industries the tourism industry could not operate successfully, even though tourists are not the primary consumers of such services (Buhalis, 2003).

The concept of tourism can be further defined according to different attributes, for example the purpose of travel (leisure, business, visiting relatives), the type of trip

Source: Leiper, 1979, p. 404.

regarding to destination, international, national, or the duration of the trip such as daytrips or overnight. In this regard, the difference among a traveler, a tourist and an excursionist must be acknowledged.

A traveler is merely a person who travels physically between geographical locations (UNWTO, 2014). However, tourists and excursionists are also considered as travelers, but the major difference between them is in the duration of the trip. According to Leiper (1979), a tourist usually makes a discretionary or temporary tour which must include at least one overnight stay from the individuals' usual place of residence and this excludes tours made specifically for financial gain. However, the accepted definition of a tourist today is that, a tourist is a traveler, whose travel includes an overnight stay, while an excursionist travels only during the duration of a day without an overnight stay (UNWTO, 2014).

This thesis focuses on the modern tourist and their travel planning process. Modern tourists are independent travelers, who search for relevant knowledge and make their individual resolutions about their trips and holidays. The modern tourist requires minor or no assistance from travel mediators such as a travel agent. Previously, travelers usually explored hotel websites, or destination management organizations or the travel agents web page for travel information. However, the paradigm today is very different due to the advancements in telecommunication and the internet. There are new travelers according to Werthner and Ricci (2004), who create their own holiday packages based on their personal preferences with information they source themselves. This thesis refers to these independent travelers as the modern tourist.

1.2 Electronic – Tourism (e-tourism)

The modern tourist can act as her or his personal travel agent and build a tailored travel package through the help of technology. Buhalis and Law (2008) mentioned that since the mid 80's the use of information and communication technologies (hereinafter ICTs) has been transforming the tourism industry. ICTs were described as communication technologies that enabled interactivity among users, or between users and information (Rice, 1984). The progress of ICTs has dramatically changed the field of tourism, both from the supply and demand aspects. In addition, several researchers also noted an important paradigm shift in the travel industry due to the acceptance of ICTs (Buhalis, Jafari, & Werthner, 1997; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Buhalis & Jun, 2011).

Not only did ICTs help improve business processes and help the supply side, it also presented consumers on the demand end with new tools. ICTs granted consumers the power to identify, customize and purchase products globally and gave them access to a pool of endless offering (Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005). Furthermore, Leung et al., (2013, p.16) mentioned that, "ICTs are imperative partners of the tourism system since they provide strategic tools to support the flow and organization of tourism information,

which is the lifeblood of the tourism industry". This is particularly true as ICTs have created a virtual space where information flow has drastically increased, both in terms of its creation and distribution. With it, creating a new paradigm in tourism both in the views of the tourism organizations and the tourists themselves.

The approach which tourists undertook to participate in tourism has altered considerably with the increase of ICTs and the expansion of electronic information. As a result electronic tourism or e-tourism was born. E-tourism is a concept that has become essential in almost all aspects of tourism today. It is one of the major areas of application for the World Wide Web (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). According to Buhalis (2003), the paradigm shift to the digitalization of all procedures and value chains in the tourism and travel sector, can be regarded as e-Tourism.

Admittedly such clear definition of e-tourism is essential to this paper since review sites, such as TripAdvisor and Virtual tourist, are important part of e-tourism. The significance of e-Tourism is immense for both the supply and demand aspects of tourism. E-tourism benefits tourism businesses by increasing their internal efficiency by managing reservations or product inventory easily via the help of ICTs in real time (Buhalis & Jun, 2011). Furthermore, tourists today are able to enhance their travel planning process through the use of e-tourism. However, to be able to fully study the effect of ICTs in tourism, it is necessary to understand the tourists travel planning process and the integration of information in travel planning.

1.3 Travel Planning

The process of travel decision making has received great attention from travel researchers. To understand the travel planning process, several models have been proposed. Many of the previous studies were generally based on classical buyer behavior and branded all tourists into one segment, in which they all had the same objectives and inspirations for undertaking tourism. However, studies by Cohen (1979, 1984) proved that tourists have varied travel motivations, traveling styles, and perform varied activities, and he rejected the idea of all tourists belonging to one single category. Furthering his research, Cohen (1979) established five different styles of tourism motivation namely, diversionary, experiential, experimental, existential and recreational. Moreover, Burton (1995) defined the tourist experience, to be the result of gratification from all the tourist industries' services initiating in the tourist generating region. The steps for planning and purchasing a tourism product, which are parts of the experience, are analyzed next so that the elements of a consumer's need for information and the sources of the used information can be explored.

Research conducted by Cox et al. (2009) mentioned that travelers follow a distinct pattern in their travel decision making process which is similar to the consumer decision making model. The original decision making model comprised of five key stages (Engel,

Blackwell, & Miniard, 1990; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2010). Cox et al. (2009) adapted these five steps in the travel context, as demonstrated in Figure 2. The pre-trip stage is where travelers realize a need to travel and begin the information search. After collecting enough information they evaluate the alternatives available, and embark on a trip which is the during trip phase. Purchase decision is an important step in the during trip stage, as travelers at the end of the trip usually tend to do a post purchase evaluation. This last stage is the post trip phase where, travelers share their experiences with family or friends and write recommendations or reviews.



Figure 2: Stages of Travel Planning

Source: Cox et al., 2009; adapted from Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard (1990) and Woodside & Lysonski (1989).

It has been further proved that travelers usually collect and evaluate several sources of travel information early on in their travel planning, to avoid making a poor choice of the travel destination (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002). Besides, recent research has confirmed that travelers use diverse types of online information sources based on their juncture on travel planning process (Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007; Choi, Lehto, & O'Leary, 2007; Choi, Lehto, Morrison, & Jang, 2011).

The above presented shows that travel planning can be regarded not only as an ongoing process but also as a process with several layers. While there are several hierarchical trip decision models, one of the significant models is proposed by Fesenmaier and Jeng (2000). The authors elaborated that all the sub decisions, including choice of destination, had various levels of importance in travel planning. Further research by Jeng and Fesenmaier (2002), mentioned that the travelers' decision making process required large

amount of both intrinsic and extrinsic information processing. Information was sourced from various places and analyzed to create possible travel agendas.

Today with information available from a variety of sources from both the real and the digital world, travelers use complex ways to plan their travel. In addition, travelers tend to use content created by other travelers to conduct their travel information gathering (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). However the inception of travel starts mostly with inspiration from social media (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011). Researchers also found that it is usually user generated content (hereinafter UGC) such as travel reviews, that are generally considered very helpful in the travel planning process (Arsal, Backman, & Baldwin, 2008). The validity of this idea can be justified with the findings by Nielsen research from April, 2012, when 13.2 million users only in America acknowledged to visiting TripAdvisor to find information about their upcoming travels (Nielsen, 2014).

1.4 Information Integration in Travel Planning

The tourism industry is heavily reliant on information technology (Sheldon, 1997; Werthner & Klein, 1999); henceforth, it is important to comprehend changes in consumer behavior and technologies that influence the circulation and accessibility of relevant travel information. Predominantly, it has been debated that understanding the nature of the online tourism domain, which is, the alignment of online tourism related information, paves a logical path for the creation of effective marketing programs and improved information systems in tourism (Fesenmaier, Werthner, & Wober, 2006; Xiang, Wöber, & Fesenmaier, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). However, before immersing into the world of online information exchange, it is important to understand how information is created and the path it uses to flow to recipients.

1.4.1 Word of Mouth (WOM)

Word of mouth (hereinafter WOM) is defined as information coming from family, friends and people, with whom a person interacts with socially, and make up the reference group of the consumer (Middleton & Clarke, 2001). These people in a person's reference group tend to influence one's behavior in a large manner (Middleton & Clarke, 2001). However, this definition was further developed as WOM being the informal, interpersonal communication among consumers to circulate information about a product, service, or company without a commercial motive (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008).

Several researchers have agreed about the persuasive power of WOM over commercials on consumers' purchase decision (Crotts, 1999; Bickart & Schindler, 2002). In tourism it is difficult for tourists to gauge the quality of a service or product without participation (McIntosh, 1972). Nonetheless, tourists who are planning a trip are able to use WOM information from sources they deem trustworthy to approximately gauge the performance of a service or tourism product. In fact, Morrison (2002) found WOM to be

one of the best persuasive sources of information for tourists. This is of central influence to the subject of this study, as the informational influence received from reference groups, are considered to be significantly important (Kumra, 2007).

The unique difference between WOM information and other information sources is that, "word of mouth is the only promotion method that is of consumers, by consumers, for consumers" (Kotler et al., 2010, p. 166). The importance of the WOM information in a tourists' decision making process is influenced by several factors, such as the personality of the tourist and external environmental factors, like society. Furthermore, word of mouth information coming from reference groups are more influential in the decision making process for a tourist than combined influence from all other sources (Middleton & Clarke, 2001). This confirms that all the information given out through the communication channels that are available for a company is insignificant compared to the information coming from reference groups or an individual's social circle. Consequently when all the needed information is gathered by the tourist, he or she forms expectations about the service (Bowie & Buttle, 2011).

Expectations are beliefs that the tourists carry with themselves to create perceptions and compare services during and after consumption (Bowie & Buttle, 2011). The result of such comparison produces a certain type of satisfaction among tourists. The type of satisfaction produced may be positive or negative depending on the results of the comparison. This means that the experience is constructed of three stages: anticipation (before the trip), consumption (during the trip) and memory (after the trip) (Ricci, 2006), and all these stages are vital parts in the experience and the creation of satisfaction.

Understanding the stages of satisfaction and their importance is essential, because these affect not only the tourist but may also affect another consumer's information search and decision making process. Satisfaction occurs when needs and expectations are met in the service experience (Kumra, 2007). However when the experience does not reach the expected level; dissatisfaction and disappointment occur (Kumra, 2007). The stage of satisfaction depends on the consumer's expectations, and the point where the expectations will be met, differs among tourists.

A tourist who is dissatisfied with the experience in a hotel may take one or more of the following actions, (a) Take no actions, (b) Complain to the company, (C) Complain to an association created for the purpose, (d) Tell other consumers of their negative experiences (Kumra, 2007). The action relevant to this study is the one, where a tourist tells other soon to be tourist about her or his experiences. Information passed in such manner creates expectations in the latter. Such expectations formed and based on an accumulation of information where one part may have been another tourists' experiences, is usually compared to the experience of the new tourist.

Prior research suggested that individuals are more likely to speak about their negative experiences than positive ones (Swanson & Hsu, 2009). Thus the spreading of negative words is faster than positive words to a larger audience. According to Swanson and Hsu (2009) majority of the travelers usually discuss their travel experiences with others and dissatisfied service experiences propagate further in their social network. While tourism companies enjoy substantial benefits from positive WOM, they also suffer immensely from negative WOM. Furthermore, with the introduction of ICTs, WOM has taken on a prevalent form as electronic word of mouth.

1.4.2 Electronic -Word of Mouth (e-WOM)

With the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies, regular word of mouth has soared to the web and taken on an electronic form. Through the use of blogs, forums and review sites, strangers are now comfortably conversing with one another in real time instead of meeting in person (Cheng & Zhou, 2010). Several prominent scholars confirmed e-WOM to be of crucial importance to the tourism sector (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens, 2009; Litvin, et al., 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009; Dickinger, 2010; Pietro, Virgilio, & Pantano, 2012; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). These researchers also agreed about the power of e-WOM communication to be no less than the power of regular word of mouth.

Litvin et al. (2008) explained e-WOM as information that is conveyed to consumers over internet based technology about particular products or services. In other words, e- WOM takes words from the mouths of the people and makes them available to others through the use of internet technology. It is useful in many ways as people can do it at their convenience. No meetings are needed to be organized for such communication or one does not have to travel from one location to another to convey such information. The information is also not lost or distorted over time. One can always refer back to a particular piece of information regarding any specific topic on the web. E-WOM can be received from different types of internet media, the information may be directed directly from one person to another, for example via e-mail or the information may be posted by one or many people to a website or review site where the information may be received by numerous people (Litvin et al, 2008).

Scholars such as Filieri & McLeay (2013), Huang, Chou, & Lin (2010), Xiang & Gretzel (2010) have previously studied the stimulus of e-WOM on travelers' decision making process and found them to be of significant importance to travel planning. With the help of new technology, consumers are able to actively participate in and spread out WOM promptly, thus enabling other travelers to make necessary preparations for their travel. For example, travelers can now in real time share their experience about their travels to a

destination from their internet connected mobile phones as they wait in line, or at the check-in desk of a hotel.

Several arguments about the credibility of e-WOM communication in tourism have occurred (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013b). As the amount of content grows and participation increases, travelers are willing to accept the words from fellow travelers over those of marketers (Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005). Furthermore, O'Connor (2008) confirmed that as the number of reviews and reviewers increase, the impact of false reviews dramatically decrease as they are overshadowed by honest and relevant reviews from travelers. In addition, reviews collected on the same platform offer the tourist an easy way to compare the negative reviews against the positive ones.

Individuals who have experienced a product or service in the past usually tend to share the details of such experience within her or his reference group. When such information is expressed in an unedited and honest form, it is known as user generated content or UGC (Gretzel 2006; Cox et al. 2009). Furthermore it has been confirmed that e-WOM are just as credible as WOM and if not polluted by any external stimuli such as product marketers (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006).

Even though there are great similarities between the before mentioned WOM and e-WOM, there are several major differences among the two. In e-WOM individuals do not have to meet face to face, they can be several time zones away, and not even communicate at the same time. Information can be left for others to pick up at their convenience (Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Moreover, with e-WOM it is possible to share, link or tag others in a conversation. In contrast such possibilities are not available in WOM (Litvin et al., 2008). Rich media such as videos, interactive maps and images can also be used in e-WOM communication. Travelers can include images from their trips, recorded video of a tour and provide invaluable information for future travelers through e-WOM.

According to Litvin et al. (2008), e-WOM has changed the structure of travel information search. The scholars suggested that as the accessibility of the information gets better and larger amount of information is available, travelers' knowledge and perceptions of travel products tend to change. Furthermore, as travelers begin to share vast amounts of information among each other, using their social networks, STNs begin to take shape.

1.5 Social Networks

Social networks may be understood as a space where individuals create their own customized home pages, document their daily logs as blogs, post images, share videos or music, exchange ideas, and connect to other interesting web services (Turban et al., 2008). According to the social network theory, "a social network is a social structure made of nodes and ties" (Turban et al., 2008). As demonstrated in figure 3, nodes are the

individuals within the networks, and ties are the relationships between these individuals. Social networks usually represent the various means, in which individuals are connected through their social familiarities (Buhalis & Jun, 2011).



Figure 3: Social network diagram

Source: FMS, 2014.

Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211) defined social networks as, "...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system."

In addition, Donath and Boyd (2004) claimed that the central purpose of a social network is simply networking and creating connections to make new friends, find dates and new business associates. The networking aspect of these sites is significantly relevant to this study as people not only use the information from such sites and their connections for travel planning, but also their extended network on such sites. Such Web 2.0 sites are becoming increasingly relevant to the modern tourists for their travel planning.

1.5.1. Web 2.0

Web 2.0 is a concept introduced by O'Reilly (2005) and it refers to the second generation of services based on the internet. He described Web 2.0 as a successor to web

1.0 in terms of a an interactive network platform which spans over all internet connected devices and continuously provides relevant information from various sources; and where individuals are also welcome to share their own data and content with others (O'Reilly 2005).

Indeed the Internet has evolved over the past 30 years to an interactive form. The web has experienced a substantial renovation since its inception. Unlike the past, the internet today allows users to participate in the creation of content. This major overhaul has ushered new possibilities about how individuals interact, and has created the stepping stone for the evolution of social networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Turban, King, Lee, Liang, and Turban (2010) developed the concept of Web 2.0 further by including services which permit individuals to collaborate and share information online in innovative ways. Blogs, social networking sites, and wikis are some of the newer ways people collaborate today (Turban et al. 2010). Moreover, web 2.0 explores the possibilities of the web which users are using as tools to review commercial products and services, and to validate or disapprove organizations for the quality of their offerings (Chung & Buhalis, 2008).

The concept of web 2.0 means that there is more collaboration between different users on the internet (Turban et al., 2010), not just separate actions of someone posting information online and someone else reading it. In web 2.0 different stakeholders communicate and even co-create information. Along the same lines, O'Reilly (2007) gave examples on how in web 2.0 there has been a shift to blogging from personal websites and the idea of participation rather than just publishing and from content management systems to wikis. Buhalis and Jun (2011) found out that through the use of Web 2.0 applications, users label contents with their chosen keywords which they upload themselves, thus making their content available on the internet for others to search. While the information in a traditional website is only managed by the administrator of the site, on wikis everyone can participate in creating and managing the content instead of just being in the role of a passive reader or information receiver.

The notion of Web 2.0 has been amended in various sectors and in tourism the term Travel 2.0 is widely used to discuss the merger of travel and Web 2.0.

1.5.2 Travel 2.0

Web services in the travel and tourism industry where users can collaborate to create and share information, is termed as Travel 2.0 (Conrady, 2007). Websites and other services encourage travelers to generate content online to be shared with others in travel 2.0. Travel 2.0 has also introduced a variety of advanced technology applications including rich media such as audio, video and flash animation, interactive content, linking, blogs, internet forums, user rating and review systems, and podcasts (Merritt, 2006; Xiang &

Gretzel, 2010). Finally, according to Pan and Fesenmaier (2006), travel 2.0 may be regarded as interaction between individuals and online space in the area of the web related to the tourism industry and destinations.

Travel 2.0 has opened new doors for travelers to get and distribute information about products to help in the decision making processes before and during the purchase phase of tourism related products. Furthermore, UGC facilitated by Web 2.0, has allowed travel blogs to have an impact on the trip planning process (Cox et al., 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012; Merritt, 2006).

The possibility to communicate in real time and get up to date information anytime not only from organizations but from other tourists has changed the dynamics of commerce in tourism. Social networks, which are the platforms and tools for people to share information and media with others (Turban et al., 2010), have made it possible for the consumers to widen the availability of information that is generated by tourists themselves. As discussed earlier, e-WOM usually plays a significant role in a tourists' decision making process. Furthermore social networking site's make it even more relevant to tourism related products as people tend to create and share their memories through images and visuals with their family and friends (Merritt, 2006).

1.5.3 Social networking sites (SNSs)

Since the introduction of the first social networking site, Six Degrees, several others, including MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and QQ, have emerged as world leaders on Web 2.0 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Scholars from various backgrounds have studied social networking sites (hereinafter SNSs) to decipher its effect on business, society and culture. Several studies have looked into its usage in tourism, and critically studied the users' engagement (Pietro, Virgilio, & Pantano, 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social networking sites have managed to transfix the world with its numerous possibilities and connective power. Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211) successfully defined SNSs as:

"...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site."

The major difference between social networks and previous version of such products is the social aspect. Users are able to connect with each other digitally by inviting friends (Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2009). Today social networks act as primary platforms for users to create and distribute unique content (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Nusair, Bilgihan, Okumus, & Cobanoglu, 2013; Pietro et al., 2012). Significant increase in the number of SNSs was noted in 2003 and majority of the imitators tried the profile centric site model, to take advantage of the demographic variations among users (Shirky, 2003).

In 2004, unlike its predecessors, Facebook.com (hereafter Facebook) was launched to cater only to Harvard university students (Cassidy, 2006). In order to become a member of the site, users had to have harvard.edu email credentials. Over time Facebook expanded and allowed other students from educational institutions to join the site, but all applicants were required to have university email addresses. This created the idea of an intimate and private community. However with time Facebook changed its policies and allowed everyone to join the SNS, and thus became one of the most prominent players in the social networking spectrum (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

SNSs often collaborate together to reach a large user base. For example, Facebook users are allowed to post a link about their Vine.com (http://www.vine.com) video. This information is shared by Facebook to notify all of the user's friends about the video. This allows both Facebook and Vine.com a video sharing site to benefit from the same user. Individuals on the network can then share this content with others across web 2.0 platforms. This easy exchange and sharing capability of SNSs make them immensely popular among users today (Svetlana, Andrei, & Hany, 2013).

According to a recent survey conducted by Pew Research Center in 2013, 43% of adults online used multiple social networking sites, with Facebook retaining its top rank among users (Pew Research Internet Project, 2013). Some 71% of online adults were Facebook users in 2013, which was a moderate increase from the 67% of adults online who used Facebook in 2012 (Pew Research Internet Project, 2013). In addition, the survey found that about 73% of online adults were part of some social networking site. Appendix B presents the results of the survey conducted by Pew Research center in 2013, which establishes the profile of a social network site user. It is thus important for us to discuss Facebook, a major SNS, and understand its relevance for tourism in this dissertation.

1.5.4 Facebook

According to Facebook (2014, p. 1):

"Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them."

With 6,818 employees and headquartered in California; Facebook boasted an impressive 1.35 billion monthly active users at the beginning of October 2014 (Facebook, 2014).

Facebook is of significant importance to the tourism industry, due to the variety of communities and networks that Facebook offers. With over 802 million daily active users (Facebook, 2014), Facebook has not only ushered considerable changes to many businesses, it has also created opportunities for hundreds of new businesses. The company has changed the way people communicate today, both in interpersonal communication and business to consumer communication (Leung et al., 2013). Facebook is considered as one of the two, 'mega trends' that has significantly impacted the tourism system, the other system being search engines (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). It has been widely adopted by travelers to search, organize, share, and annotate their travel stories and experiences through its online communities (Leung et al., 2013).

Among the various applications and use of Facebook, 'Facebook Groups' is particularly popular and useful. Facebook groups allow individuals or organizations to discuss topics of collective interest (Gordon & Stephens, 2007). Similarly this application's ability to gather members and distribute messages effortlessly through the social network has attracted a lot of attention. In addition, Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) in their research found that users are collaborating on social, political, and other special interest topics such as health, environment and economy, through the use Facebook Groups.

One study by Nyland and Marvez (2007) suggested that more people are using such groups for social participation than for entertainment related activities. A look into Facebook usage, by Stankov, Lazić, and Dragićević (2010) revealed that only half of the destination management organizations in Europe had an official Facebook presence in 2008. These numbers drastically changed in 2010 when nearly all the destination management organizations websites had robust Facebook presence (Shao, Dávila Rodriguez, & Gretzel, 2012).

Moreover a study about the perception of meeting industry professionals and attendees toward the use of Facebook use, found that the perceived usefulness of social network such as Facebook is a strong antecedent of the attendees' acceptance of social media (Qu & Lee, 2011). Similarly, the World Travel Market (2011) industry report publicized that one out of three leisure travelers in the United Kingdom choose their hotels based on the information on sites like Facebook and review site such as TripAdvisor.

1.6 Social Travel Networks (STNs)

The above discussed issues show that travelers increasingly rely on UGC as sources of information (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Cox et al., 2009; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009). While there is a treasure trove of literature available around the topics of Web 2.0, use of search engines in travel planning, there appears to be a lack of relevant research on STNs in the domains of tourism.

Table 1 presents the most popular scholarly work in information sciences and tourism demonstrating the lack of relevant literature in the area of technology and tourism.

Торіс	Author(s)	Year Published
Attitude of tourists toward the use of IT	Kaha, Vogtb & MacKayc	2011
Destination information system	Luo, Guo & Jiang	2010
Evaluation of tourism websites	Baggio, Scott & Cooper Li & Wang Hu, Cheung & Law	2010 2011 2008
Effect of IT on the tourism industry	Buhalis Hojeghan & Esfangareh	2004 2011
Effect of IT on tourism enterprises	Cooper	2006
E-commerce and tourism	Vadell & Orfila-Sintes Alford	2007 2010
Intelligence systems	Gretzel	2011
Recommender systems	Luo et al. Goossen, Meeuwsen, Franke, & Kuyper	2010 2009
Semantic web and ontology technologies	Zheng, Gretzel & Fesenmaier Fodor & Werthner	2009 2005
Tourism network marketing	Wu, Wei & Chen Lim Choi et al.	2008 2011 2007
Tourism enterprises toward IT application	Vrana & Zafiropoulos	2006
Tourist Behavior and services	Matloka & Buhalis	2010
Virtual travel communities	Wang & Fesenmaier Chung & Buhalis	2004 2008
Web 2.0 websites	Bingley, Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens	2010

Table 1: List of scholar works in the area of technology and tourism

Source: Adapted from Li, Buhalis, & Zhang, 2013.

In addition during the month of March 2014, all social networking, travel and UGC related publications in tourism and hospitality were queried on EBSCO Host, Google Scholar and Science Direct, three of the largest and most popular online databases and search engines according to Buhalis and Law (2008). After combing through results only one article was located that used the term, 'online social travel network' written by Ban and Ramsaran-Fowdar (2013). However, the authors of the article never defined the term, nor presented any previous literature on the topic. Plant (2004, p. 54) was the only researcher who presented the closest possible definition for a STN with his definition of internet communities as:

"A collective group of entities, individuals or organizations that come together either temporarily or permanently through an electronic medium to interact in a common problem or interest space."

Plant's (2004) definition does not take into consideration the tourism aspect; neither does it address the idea of trust or a social bond. A collective group of entities, individuals or organizations may temporarily or permanently come together through an electronic medium anonymously to interact on a common problem or interest space. Conversely, this may not create a safe and trusting social environment for all other users to participate as discussed before in the SNSs segment of this chapter. Therefore due to the lack of an acceptable existing definition for STNs, a working definition for this thesis is proposed:

Social Travel Networks (STNs) are travel 2.0 platforms and applications, with social networking capabilities where travelers and users foster social interaction and cocreation of experiences through the exchange of tourism and travel related information, and relevant content such as images and visuals.

This definition helps to clearly identify a STN and aids in the development of this thesis. STNs are useful in various ways, which include simplifying communication and information sharing among travelers and tourists, providing recommendations about destinations and services, or simply informing travelers about local customs. To better understand the idea of STN, a list of the top 30 social travel networks on the web during the month of August 2014, is compiled in Appendix C. The list is based on website rank among the top 500 travel related sites in the world according to Alexa, which is a web based company that delivers meaningful web analytics to its users. The company has been in business since 1996 and is considered a global pioneer in the world of analytical insight. The traffic rank provided by Alexa is a measure of how much traffic a website has compared to other sites in the same category over a three month period (Alexa, 2014).

Since there is a lack of relevant literature on STNs, this section of the thesis is therefore furthered by exploring topics that are closely related, such as travel blogs and virtual travel communities in connection to STNs.

1.6.1 Travel blogs

Digital storytelling has taken the forefront of chronicling ones travel experience. Travelers today use web blogs to share their experiences with others across the globe. The word blogs originate from the shortened word, "web log" (Chow, 2005). Furthermore, Blood (2002) defined blogs as link driven sites where individuals can compile essays or publish commentary and personal notes as a short form journal on the web. Today blog users are however very different in means that individuals are even able to use their mobile phones to make contributions and can include rich media such as audio and video (Baker & Green, 2005).

The immense popularity of blogs has been documented by Baker and Green (2005), who estimated that 40,000 new blogs were created every day. Users who write blogs do it for two major reasons; one of self-expression and second, for social interaction (Papacharissi, 2002). In addition, Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) discovered that helping others and the satisfaction of sharing experiences was the major incentive for travelers to write online blogs. This was further confirmed through a study done by Hsu and Lin (2008), who claimed that individuals actively contribute in a blog in order to support and help fellow bloggers and not for any other rewards. In other words, people care to help others through their experiences and not just because of egoistical or financial motives.

Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, and Tomkins (2004) successfully categorized all blogs into three distinct layers. First of which are the individual bloggers, a second layer where bloggers work together to construct friendship and a third layer where virtual communities are created in blog space by special interest groups. Pudliner (2007) considered travel blogs to be distinct as they associate clearly with the bloggers personal sentiment and their journey. Today there are various travel blogs or enhanced forms of it available across the web. Virtual Tourist, Lonely Planet, TravelPod and Travel Blog allow users to publish and create travel related blogs. Another part of STN present virtual travel communities, which will be further elaborated in the subsequent part.

1.6.2 Virtual travel communities

Due to the experiential nature of tourism, virtual tourism communities provide a solution to foster needed communication among travelers, and between travelers and travel suppliers (Lee & Gretzel, 2006). A large number of online communities are available today such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Yahoo Travel, to cater to the specific needs of travel users. These websites specialize in product and service reviews and serve as an open travel platform where travelers can post queries, reviews about destinations, services and products, and answer questions from other fellow travelers (Keates, 2007).

A great number of travelers are turning to online travel communities to fulfill their needs for communication, information, and entertainment (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). According to Pew Internet and American life project (2010) 58% of adults researched online before they made a product or service purchase, and approximately 25% posted reviews and comments regarding the things they bought. Furthermore, the ratio of people that made travel reservations or bought travel services online such as airline tickets, hotel rooms, or rental cars increased from 18% in May 2000 to 52% in the Project's May 2010 survey (Pew Research Internet Project, 2010). The survey also noted a 41% increase in the sharing of product and service information on social networking sites, where 46% of Americans reported the use of internet sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn.

Travelers today consistently refer to other travelers' reviews before they purchase high value products such as flights, cruises and holiday packages (Park, Kim & Han, 2007). This was confirmed by Gretzel and Yoo (2008), who in their research proved that users extensively use reviews for travel related decisions.

The quality of travel related information along with the volume of up-to-date information, make STNs significantly important to the traveler. However to be able to bind all these different areas of information technology in tourism together it is important to use the theories of TAM and IAM, which were introduced in the opening segment of this dissertation and will be further elaborated in the following chapter. Additionally the case of TripAdvisor will be incorporated in the discussions, as it is the basis for this research.

1.7 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Originally proposed by Davis in 1986, TAM is currently used in studies to forecast users intention to adopt new technologies (Wu, Lin, & Lin, 2011; Ayeh et al., 2013a, 2013b; Fesenmaier, 2010), with prominence in participation to online communities (Chung, Park, Wang, Fulk, & McLaughlin, 2010), for learning (Bourgonjon, Valcke, Soetaert, & Schellens, 2010; Saade & Bahli, 2005), for shopping (Baier & Stuber, 2010), for tourism and hospitality (Litvin et al., 2008). Furthermore, Ban and Ramsaran-Fordar (2013) worked on developing pragmatic support for the TAM model to identify two key beliefs including perceived ease of use (hereinafter PEOU) and perceived usefulness (hereinafter PU) to clarify and envisage user's acceptance of an information system in the tourism sector. Figure 4 presents the technology acceptance model as proposed by Davis (1989).

TAM was established upon the framework of the theory of reasoned action (hereinafter TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The primary objective of TAM was to explore computer usage behavior. This was to be achieved through the understanding of two constructs, namely perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Davis (1989) claimed TAM to be one of the models frequently used to explain why a user uses information systems.





Source: Davis, 1989.

Central to the TRA is that attitudes and subjective norms are a function of belief (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) which ultimately influences intention and consequently behavior. TAM offers a foundation with which researchers can trace how peripheral variables effect belief, attitude, and intention to use. The original TAM construct posited two main variables as mentioned earlier, PEOU and PU as key determinants in influencing a person's behavior to use a specific technology in an organizational context.

An earlier work by Mick and Fournier (1998) examined the emotional side of technology adoption and a more recent research by Chtourou and Souiden (2010) demonstrated the importance of emotional motivators on buyers' acceptance of technological products. These finding were consistent with a study by Bruner and Kumar (2005), where customers confessed that the exciting aspect of a device was an important precursor affecting their attitude toward the use of a mobile device.

Technology adoption models are limited in their broader application to the consumer domain, particularly in the tourism context. Baron, Patterson, and Harris (2006, p. 112) speculated that the, "theory available to explain and predict consumer acceptance of technological innovation, especially information and communication technology" is unsurprisingly limited due to the lack of inclusion of the social and cultural context of the process. In fact, Bouwman et al. (2012) have also criticized the TAM model for its inability to account for the social context, limited explanation of user intentions, lack of consideration for the consumer context and the hedonic factor.

According to Baron et al. (2006) previous measurements ignored the technology paradoxes (Mick & Fournier 1998), and advocated that the development of theory associated with perceived enjoyment, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use must not be confined by the prevailing quantifiable models of technology, and instead draw more on the theory from studies of consumer practices (Baron et al., 2006). Much of the existing research in tourism focuses on intention, with a very limited number of

studies dealing with actual use or adoption of technology. Nonetheless, TAM accomplishes to clarify why people choose to accept or reject a particular technology while performing a task. TAM is relevant to this study, as the primary purpose is to find out the impact of STNs, a particular form of technology individuals use for their travel planning.

This thesis differs from majority of the previous research in one major aspect. The idea of TAM is expanded further with the idea of information adoption. Tourists are not necessarily accepting the technology when they are using STNs. ICTs make the technology simple and available to majority of the tourist across the globe as discussed previously in the literature review section. However, tourists have the power to choose whether to or not to use the *information* provided through such technology. This research explores this idea of *information* provided through technological advancement in ICTs and how users are using it for their travel planning.

1.8 Information Adoption Model (IAM)

The information adoption model, similar to TAM was derived also from TRA and its derivative, the TAM (Davis 1989). The IAM was formerly created in an effort to better fathom how people form intentions toward accepting knowledge about specific ideas, behavior, or technology (Filieri, & McLeay, 2013; Sussman & Siegal, 2003). However, IAM can extend itself to examine the adoption of advice (Sussman & Siegal, 2003), such as the material contained in online reviews (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjhon 2008). Not many scholars have probed the experiences of travelers' adoption of information from online reviews (Cheung et al., 2008). Sussman and Siegal (2003) in their study explored how people behave differently from suggestions and recommendations they received via e-mail in an organizational context. The information adoption model is presented in Figure 5.





Source: Sussman & Siegal, 2003.

Travel planning, as discussed before, requires an extensive informational search. Thus, IAM is significantly important to understand these complex decisions. Travelers tend to cherry-pick among several information sources based on their travel plans or their information requirement (Vogt & Fesenmaier 1998; Zins 2009), hence establishing a notion that tourists regard various information sources and their trustworthiness differently.

Friends and relatives play an integral role as decision aids, and the amount of trust on information generating from such a source is immense and is considered to be high in argument quality (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Loda, Teichmann, & Zins, 2009). Moreover, Fodness and Murray (1999) argued that in online search, the utmost confidence is on friends or relatives aids in the decision making process. Bickart and Schindler (2001) reasoned that UGC is considered expressively effective against company generated communication and has immense influence on consumer purchase decision. It is considered more credible or source credibility is higher, as an information source. Furthermore, the digital world creates a sense of fellow feeling among the participants.

In this research the summation of argument quality and source credibility will be considered as trustworthiness.

1.9 Constructs of TAM and IAM

In this section the constructs of TAM, (perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness) and that of IAM, (source credibility and argument quality as perceived trustworthiness) are discussed in detail. It is of significant importance to explain these constructs as the hypotheses used in this dissertation are derived from this part of the literature review.

1.9.1 Perceived ease of use (PEOU)

Perceived ease of use is, "the degree to which the prospective user expects the target system to be free of effort" (Davis, Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1989, p. 985). In other words, the functions of the system should be easy to understand, it should work without interruption and speed of information processing (Castañeda, Frias, & Rodriguez, 2009). The eagerness to use information systems and the PEOU of such systems enhance the information seeking process by assisting in faster information search and complex problem solving (Castañeda et al., 2009). Moreover, Davis (1986) advocated that people will use a technology if they perceive it to be easy to use. Several other researchers also validated the impact of ease of use in the framework of TAM (Casaló et al., 2010; Castañeda et al., 2009; Huh, Kim, & Law, 2009; Morosan, 2012)

Ease of use has been found to create a large amount of variance in the usefulness construct (Mathieson, 1991) and increase work throughout with equivalent effort (Davis et al., 1989). In addition, some scholars mentioned that perceived usefulness is influenced by the ease of use; however perceived usefulness does not influence ease of use (Castañeda, et al., 2009). Henceforth, the easier a system is to use, the more useful it usually is (Davis et al., 1989; Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the ease of gathering information from TripAdvisor about travel planning allows tourists to free up time can be used to further develop the travel plans. This allows for more to be done with a small amount of effort and is considerably useful for the user (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1992).

1.9.2 Perceived usefulness (PU)

Perceived usefulness is defined as, "the prospective user's subjective probability that using a specific application system will increase his or her job performance" (Davis, et al., 1989, p. 985). Similar to PEOU, PU is also related to the speed of execution, efficacy, and productivity along with a few other factors (Castañeda, et al., 2009). King and He (2006) endorsed that, the effect of PU is almost two fold that of PEOU. In addition, several studies have established the significance of perceived usefulness as a

basic component in the use of technology among hospitality and tourism practitioners (Huh et al., 2009; Morosan, 2012).

The TAM model proposes that PU has a direct impact on behavioral intention (Davis et al., 1989) to use the information system to accomplish greater performance and supplementary benefits. Other research in the same area has shown that PU motivates willingness to adopt various technologies (Castañeda et al., 2009). TAM has also been used to explain the usage of online social networks; and PU was found to positively affect actual social network usage (Kwon & Wen, 2010). STNs are rich with information generated by various users through e-WOM. It is universally accepted that individuals would make use of information if they consider it useful to accomplish specific results.

1.9.3 Perceived trustworthiness (PT)

Trust is an indispensable component for a sustainable business relationship (Palvia, 2009; Wen, 2009). Accordingly, the perception of trust has been scrutinized in social sciences including sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, organizational behavior, and in information systems and marketing (Bhattacherjee, 2002; Gefen 2002; Siau & Shen 2003).

Moreover, in marketing literature trust has been recognized as the central element in creating lasting relationships (Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Sussman and Siegal (2003) confirmed that there is a strong positive relationship between information trustworthiness and information usefulness. Jin, Cheung, Lee, and Chen (2009) supported the findings of Sussman and Siegal (2003), and emphasized that information usefulness is directly related to a user's level of trust in the information presented.

Trustworthiness of the e-WOM is a key aspect which tends to affect the information recipients perceived risk. Yoo and Gretzel (2009) confirmed the existence of a relationship between structure of content and trustworthiness. Furthermore, Yoo and Gretzel (2010) found that perceived expertise and trustworthiness of e-WOM creators were the significant predictors of trusts in travel related content. Similarly Berry and Parasuraman (1991, p.144) argued that, "customer-company relationships require trust" and that "effective services marketing depends on the management of trust because the customer typically must buy a service before experiencing it" in the service sector.

Higher levels of trust are observed among participants of distinct digital travel communities versus those on a nonspecific social networking site (Burgess et al., 2009). Furthermore varying levels of trust is documented among users based on the amount of information available about the individuals creating the information (Xie, Miao, Kuo, & Lee, 2011). Trust in community members has been documented to be a noteworthy factor in the behavioral intention to use UGC (Yeh & Choi, 2011). Along the same lines,

Dickinger (2010) confirmed that UGC is usually considered highly trustworthy, granted that the information provider accepts and obeys the rules of conduct, is ethical and is considered to be honest. TripAdvisor allows all users to have access to the profiles of the other users who create content on the site. This feature on TripAdvisor helps the site to build confidence among its users to trust and use information from TripAdvisor for travel planning.

Various literary work has confirmed the positive effect of trust on behavioral intention (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In addition, Jeong, Oh, and Gregoire (2003) found that when travelers believe content to be untrustworthy or erroneous, they will moderate their usage or avoid the website completely. Furthermore, Kerstetter and Cho (2004) mentioned that in the framework of information search regarding travel, credibility of the information source was the strongest indicator about the type of information source used. Therefore it is safe to conclude from these researches that with higher trust in STN there is higher probability of a user continuing their relationship with the network. In fact it is similar to the idea presented by de Ruyter, Wetzels, and Kleijnen (2001) about the positive correlation between the level of trust and a consumer's commitment to a service.

Therefore within the context of tourism, perceived trustworthiness of information from a particular source can lead to either a satisfactory or dissatisfactory travel experience. Furthermore, it can also be realized that users tend to use information they find trustworthy.

1.9.4 Behavioral intention to use information (BITUI)

Behavioral intentions suggest how an individual is likely to behave in a definite way (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002). Intentions have been confirmed to serve as a measure in relation to consumer behavior in technology (Venkatesh, 1999). Behavioral intention to use information technology has been grouped into four categories: (1) individual context, (2) system context, (3) social context, and (4) organizational context (Park, 2009). Furthermore, Thong, Hong, and Tam (2002) reported that when it comes to using digital information, organizational content affects both PEOU and PU. Lin and Lu (2000) likewise found that, increased information availability brought about significant use of information and improved perception about the ease of use. Beliefs that something is useful and easy to use usually lead to higher behavioral intentions to use such product or service (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In fact Jeong et al. (2003) confirmed that the relationship between online information and behavioral intention emphasized that information trustworthiness was a major determinant of behavioral intentions to use information. Moreover several authors agreed that actual behavior and behavioral intentions are highly correlated (Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). Therefore this thesis considers the intention to participate in an online

travel community (e.g. TripAdvisor) a good indicator of the level of user participation in that network.

It is assumed that intentions capture the motivational factors that influence behavior and higher levels of motivation usually result in better performance (Ajzen, 1991). Behavioral intentions have been well-established as a strong predictor of actual usage of information technologies (Davis et al., 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003) and of online shopping (Ajzen, 2011; Lin, 2007).

1.10 Linking Social Travel Networks to theory

This section reviews important theories and relevant concepts to provide a comprehensive background for this dissertation. This thesis hopes to combine the ideas of social networks, e-WOM, and travel 2.0 to understand its impact on the travel planning process and make valuable contribution to current tourism research. Besides in current tourism literature there is a lack in understanding of the role of STNs in travel planning. Therefore, literature from the areas of travel community reviews, online travel websites, social networks and other e-WOM sited were used to understand the impact on travel planning.

Several studies have addressed the implications of UGC for travel decisions (Arsal et al., 2008; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008; Cox et al., 2009 Enoch & Grossman, 2009; Huang et al., 2010). The result of these findings strongly imply that today travelers are taking keen interest to find out what others are saying about a place before they embark on a journey of their own. Indeed a survey by comScore (2007) found that 84 % of travelers actually found reviews associated with travel significant in their travel purchase decisions. Furthermore, according to Gretzel (2007), content created by travelers and travel reviews had significant influence on the tourists' planning process. This was due to the fact that most of the tourists felt close association and believed the reviewers due to their prior experience with the product or service. Furthermore, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) reported that travel related information from social media constituted more than one tenth of the search results. These findings are significant as over the past few years there has been a major increase in the number of users on social media and travel review sites.

Accordingly, Burgess et al. (2009) mentioned that tourists prefer to trust individuals who have no commercial interest in sharing information or experiences. Additionally, Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004) mentioned that consumers tend to believe information from online sources even though much of the electronic reviews are anonymous. This behavior is interesting due to fact that tourism experiences involve considerable financial and psychological risk taking as discussed previously in this chapter. People are willing to trust strangers today as they can relate to them in some form or the other. STNs are increasingly becoming transparent as the social sites are providing valuable information about person's likes, age and location. Although this

raises the question of privacy issues, it also helps to create trust among others. The privacy issues that are raised are not from the demand side, but more from the supply end, where companies are using this information for product marketing. Moreover, a study conducted by Gretzel (2007) and Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts (2007) discovered that bulk of the respondents considered user based travel reviews to be helpful, informative and trustworthy. These characteristics of travel reviews encouraged travelers to have higher levels of confidence in using such information for travel planning.

Tourists search extensively for travel related information in order to safeguard themselves from unfamiliar situations during trip (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Jun, Vogt & MacKay, 2007). They usually take such measures as reading reviews and evaluating the service or destination, because the quality of tourism products is difficult to gauge prior purchase (McIntosh, 1972). Additionally a study conducted by Sidali, Schulze, and Spiller (2009), found that more than 80% of the respondents chose their holiday accommodation based on e-WOM recommendation. Along similar framework of thought, information search help millions of users to locate relevant social media content pages that can influence product awareness, and loyalty levels (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006).

Several researchers acknowledged the importance of social media content that is generated by travelers with paramount importance for travel planning (Cox et al., 2009; Yoo & Gretzel, 2010; Lo, McKercher, Lo et al., 2011; Tussyadiah, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011). Furthermore, Huang, Basu, and Hsu (2010) reasoned that traveler's primarily rationale behind using social media and UGC was travel information search. This is particularly true as a previous research by Cox et al. (2009) established that reviews and recommendations from social networks were primarily used at the early stage of travel planning. Similarly, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) mentioned that travel 2.0 content on social media helped inform tourists about destinations and encouraged the choice of travel destination. In addition according to a survey conducted by Cox et al. (2009) of 12,544 respondents; among inbound tourists to Australia, 22% used content from travel 2.0 services to evaluate alternatives and 15% used this information to make their purchase decision.

Besides travelers often like to imagine themselves traveling through the reviews of others and apprehend services based on the perception of their, friends or fellow consumers (Leung et al., 2013). Similarly Tussyadiah et al. (2011) claimed that UGC on travel 2.0 sites helped travelers gain insight about a place by distinguishing consistency in the monologue, and subsequently generated higher motivation along with eagerness to choose a destination.

Furthermore, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness and perceived trustworthiness were established to have an impact on behavioral intention to use information. Since STNs are massive repositories of information that is available to tourists' for their travel
planning the ideas presented in this chapter help to understand the significance of it for this study. However to successfully establish this research it must be analyzed if tourists actually accept the information from STNs in their travel planning process and how useful do they find such information. This is achieved through the evaluation of hypotheses which are presented in the next chapter.

2 RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

The main purpose of this dissertation is to study the impact of social travel networks on the travel planning process. To achieve this, theories of TAM and IAM are used to create a conceptual model that will be used for the hypotheses testing. This section of the paper derives from theory and hypotheses are going to be addressed in order to answer the research question.

As discussed in the literature review section, perceived ease of use claimed to have a significant positive impact on perceived usefulness and behavioral intention to use. Therefore on the nature of STN and theories of TAM by Davis (1989) the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Perceived ease of using STN positively influences the perceived usefulness of STN for travel planning.

H2: Perceived ease of using STN positively influences the behavioral intention to use information from STN.

It was also noted from theory that capacity at which information is found useful has a direct relationship on the behavioral intention to use such information. It follows then to hypothesize the following:

H3: Perceived usefulness of STN positively influences the behavioral intention to use information from STN for travel planning.

In addition to examine the influence of trust on behavioral intention based on the theory of IAM by Sussman and Siegal (2003) and usefulness of a particular information network, this study encompasses previous theory by exploring the differential effects of trust on behavioral intention and usefulness. Henceforth the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Perceived trustworthiness of STN positively influences the perceived usefulness of STN for travel planning.

H5: Perceived trustworthiness of STN positively influences the behavioral intention to use information from STN for travel planning.

Based on the hypothesis above, the following structural model demonstrated in figure 6 is proposed to study the impact of social travel networks on travel planning. This model helps to link the various constructs of TAM, IAM and the hypotheses proposed.



Figure 6: Proposed model for social travel network study

3 THE CASE OF TRIPADVISOR

3.1 TripAdvisor

The base for analysis of this research is the case of TripAdvisor, which is currently the world largest travel website and claims to help travelers plan and have the perfect trip (TripAdvisor, 2014). This website offers its users reliable advice from real travelers around the globe and a wide variety of travel choices along with travel planning features. It was founded in February 2000 and currently manages sites in 40 countries and in 23 languages (TripAdvisor, 2014). TripAdvisor operates and manages websites under 23 other travel media brands; such as "AirfareWatchdog, BookingBuddy, CruiseCritic, EveryTrail, Family Vacation Critic, FlipKey, GateGuru, Holiday Lettings, Holiday Watchdog, Independent Traveler, Jetsetter, lafourchette, Niumba, Onetime, Oyster, SeatGuru, SmarterTravel, Tingo, Travel Pod, Tripbod, VacationHomeRentals, VirtualTourist, and Kuxun" (TripAdvisor, 2014).

TripAdvisor also includes 'TripAdvisor for Business', a devoted part that gives the tourism businesses access to millions of monthly TripAdvisor visitors. The company has

more than 2,000 employees as of May 2014 (TripAdvisor, 2014). According to a factsheet provided by TripAdvisor (2014, p. 1), their current content portfolio comprises of:

- "More than 150 million reviews and opinions from travelers around the world
- More than 4 million businesses and properties in 140,000+ destinations, including:
 - 810,000+ hotels, Bed & Breakfasts, and specialty lodging
 - 600,000+ vacation rentals
 - 2.2 million restaurants
 - 420,000+ attractions
- More than 21 million candid traveler photos
- More than 100 new contributions are posted every minute
- More than 60 million email able members worldwide
- On average, nearly 2,800 new topics are posted every day to the TripAdvisor forums
- More than 90 percent of questions posted to TripAdvisor's English-speaking forums are replied to by other travelers within 24 hours."

TripAdvisor is grounded on the idea that travelers count on other travelers' reviews to plan their travels, or can help them in their decision making process. Therefore with their massive community, one would imagine social interaction among users to be important. However, Yoo and Gretzel (2011) claimed that this is not true and social interaction is not necessarily a major purpose for TripAdvisor's users. On the contrary Vermeulen and Seegers, (2008) mentioned that consumer reviews posted on TripAdvisor usually represent a substantial amount of social media for tourism purposes.

Accordingly, it is ostensible that TripAdvisor leveraged on such knowledge and integrated with the world's largest social network, Facebook. TripAdvisor leveraged on the Web 2.0 opportunities by integrating with Facebook and becoming social (Facebook, 2014a). According to a report on Facebook, TripAdvisor was successfully able to map out numerous ways to make the most of the Facebook integration, a strategy that has capitulated strong results for TripAdvisor, as Facebook users have 27% higher engagement on TripAdvisor (Facebook, 2014a). The integration of TripAdvisor and Facebook integration has allowed them to create a set of successful applications which engage travelers to easily and voluntarily share valued information.

The 'Facebook Login' tool allows users easy access to login to their TripAdvisor account and add more than 1 in 3 reviews on TripAdvisor (Facebook 2014a).

Figure 7: Facebook Login Tool for TripAdvisor.



Source: TripAdvisor, 2014a.

Furthermore, the 'Facebook Login' tool links TripAdvisor's site, mobile applications and 'Facebook Canvas' experience for the user. This integration helps to bind the travel and the social network together. Facebook (2014a) mentioned that 'Facebook Login' gives TripAdvisor users a hassle free environment to plan their trip on the TripAdvisor site, take their route on the go with their mobile phone or other device, and ultimately when they return home share their experience with Facebook friends. Figure 7 above demonstrates the Facebook login tool for TripAdvisor. Users are just able to click the button, 'Sign in with Facebook' and access their TripAdvisor homepage instantly.

After logging into TripAdvisor, using Facebook, the users experience an exclusive, tailored outlook of a destination with friends' ratings, reviews, likes, check-ins, and other information (Facebook, 2014a). TripAdvisor calls such information, "The wisdom of friends" (Facebook, 2014a). Moreover, with the help of such integration, travelers on Facebook create travel maps, rate attractions and earn badges which produce stories that are shared on their friends News Feed. Figure 8 below displays an example of a story TripAdvisor may post on 'Facebook's News Feed'.

TripAdvisor furthers their cause as a STN through their popular TripAdvisor canvas application on Facebook. TripAdvisor canvas allows tens of millions of travelers to make travel a more social and richer experience (Facebook, 2014a). The travelers' list cities they have visited on a map of the world, number of their friends connected with them through Facebook on TripAdvisor and number of places they have rated. This information is clearly and concisely displayed on the canvas application, encouraging others on the social network to take interest and thereby interact more with the TripAdvisor brand.

Welcome back, Syed Your 501 friends have pinned 6,576 cities. Include your other friends & see who's traveled where. Soo friends Across the Globe Add Friends Add Friends Image: Solution of the state of the s

Figure 8: Example of TripAdvisor Story



Facebook (2014a) mentioned that in TripAdvisor's Facebook application (hereinafter app), travelers are allowed to pin cities which they have visited and can list destinations where they wish to travel in the future, as well as rate the places they visited on prior trips. The traveler can easily review which his or hers Facebook friend has been to a specific city, allowing him to compare travel notes.

The app uses 'Open Graph' (a technology Facebook provides) to customize properties, such as locations and hotels, to let travelers share the cities and their favorite places they have been to, and put them on their Facebook timeline. TripAdvisor also uses 'Open Graph' to permit travelers to rate and review destinations and travel related services. Till now, TripAdvisor users have released more than 1 billion Open Graph stories about their travels, aiming to help and inspire numerous friends (Facebook, 2014a).

TripAdvisor takes advantage of such social networking opportunities and uses it to communicate with a large audience, while furthering business by engaging friends to share stories about their travels together. According to a recent report published by Facebook, more than one third of new TripAdvisor reviews are posted by users who sign in using Facebook Login, and since re-launching the TripAdvisor canvas app with Open Graph, the number of users that visit TripAdvisor on a monthly basis, have increased ten times through the mixture of actions including timeline, News Feed, and an advertising campaign (Facebook, 2014a).

Figure 9 demonstrates the TripAdvisor canvas app where users come to when they use the TripAdvisor app on Facebook. The canvas displays to the user the number of cities she or he has visited over the past years, total number of countries travelled to and the total number of reviews posted on TripAdvisor by that individual. The canvas further displays an area where a traveler can keep track of the cities they have already been to, cities they will travel to and cities they consider as a favorite for a future trip. In addition, the app also provides social network information for the user, mentioning how many of his or her friends are already on the travel network. With the added share functionality, users take advantage of the app, and share their travel stories with their families and friends, thereby passing on valuable travel advice.



Figure 9: TripAdvisor Canvas application

Source: Facebook, 2014a.

3.2 TripAdvisor Services

TripAdvisor as a STN provides not only reviews from its users, to its users, but also provides a host of other services. These services create value for TripAdvisor users and helps maintain the TripAdvisor brand while generating revenue for the company. The following section discusses the major complimentary services that TripAdvisor provides to all its users.

3.2.1 Candid traveler photos

TripAdvisor users are encouraged to post their travel photos on the STN. According to TripAdvisor (2014b) travelers spend more time on listings with more than thirty photos, as many travelers will not book a property without images. Users are allowed to upload photos to TripAdvisor in several ways. Firstly, users can write a review about a destination, hotel, restaurant, and point of interest such as a museum or church and add up to ten photos with their review. Secondly, users are welcome to add photos to an already listed accommodation, restaurant or attraction on the website. Photos, along with reviews, give potential guests confidence to choose a destination or a property for their trip. Admittedly, Kevin Carter, a TripAdvisor spokesman, mentioned that the company decided to give travelers photos more prominence to improve the travel planning process and it is considered as a natural extension of the TripAdvisor content (Tnooz, 2014). In conclusion, with more than twenty one million images on the site, travelers can get a real view of the hotel, its attractions and restaurants worldwide to help them with their travel planning.

3.2.2 Forums

TripAdvisor provides forums to its users. Forums permit members to share their opinions and ask for experiences and advice about their travels in an interactive discussion with the community. Users can get firsthand information and advice through the use of forums. Several forums have, 'Destinations Experts' who are regular contributors and are passionate about the destinations they represent. Destination experts also help moderate forums, and assist users to navigate TripAdvisor effectively (TripAdvisor, 2014c). While destination experts are not direct employees of TripAdvisor and do not receive any financial benefits, they are highly respected as a part of the TripAdvisor team for their services. Forums are also used by TripAdvisor to collect intelligence from users about the product. Regular surveys and threads related to the improvement of TripAdvisor is posted on forums. Everyone who is a TripAdvisor member is allowed to participate and share their valued opinion.

3.2.3 Saves

TripAdvisor integrates the 'Saves' feature into their site by allowing travelers to save attraction reviews, a restaurant or hotel to their personal folders, called 'My Trips' (TripAdvisor, 2014). This allows travelers to expand and adapt their plans by adding photos, maps, details of the travel plan and other notes. Such feature allows users to effectively plan their trips and organize vast amount of information.

3.2.4 Hotel Price Comparison

TripAdvisor with its immense amount of data helps travelers compare hotel prices during their travel planning. Steve Kaufer, co-founder and CEO of TripAdvisor mentioned that, "We want to help travelers plan and have the perfect trip, not drive them crazy with endless annoying pop-ups before they've booked it. We are excited to offer real-time hotel prices and availability in one convenient display" (TripAdvisor, 2014d).

TripAdvisor uses an easily readable layout to display pricing and availability of hotel rooms from multiple booking partners in one view. Furthermore, this feature allows travelers to sort and filter through the variety of hotels and choose their ideal hotel at a great price. In addition, travelers are welcome to study a hotel for their preferred dates of stay, compare options in order to select their ideal property, and click through to the booking partners' sites to complete the transaction. Steve Kaufer believes that this is the most rational step in the evolution of TripAdvisor and furthers his statement by mentioning that, "Pairing our best-in-class user-generated content with pricing in one display gives a better experience to our travelers and even more qualified leads to our hotel booking partners" (TripAdvisor, 2014d p. 1). Figure 10 below is a screenshot of

Figure 10: TripAdvisor hotel price comparison hotel price comparison page from TripAdvisor.

Source: TripAdvisor, 2014.



3.2.5 TripAdvisor Flights

Travelers have the opportunity to browse through the largest list of flights with the best deals offered. TripAdvisor claims it to be a first of its-kind fees estimator, which can help travelers grasp the real cost of a flight in a single display (TripAdvisor 2014a). According to TripAdvisor, the 'Fees Estimator' dynamically evaluates the baggage cost and other amenities into the live display, so that travelers are not surprised or even stopped at the gate. This tool on TripAdvisor also includes 'SeatGuru' - airline seating maps with reviews from users, ratings of airlines from real flyers, and real time seat availability charts. Furthermore, TripAdvisor adds 'TripTip! Alerts' to the flights and fees estimator giving travelers an opportunity to purchase business-class or first-class tickets at the price of coach fare. Moreover, TripAdvisor Flights also offers detailed inflight insights, information about amenities and real traveler photos combined with the ability to check for the lowest prices for airlines worldwide (TripAdvisor 2014a).

3.2.6 Maps

Using a, 'Web 2.0 Mashup' web application hybrid, where a web application or website mixes content from several sources; TripAdvisor launched its, 'Maps' feature. The senior vice president of marketing for TripAdvisor, Christine Petersen, claims that the mash up of maps with travelers' reviews on TripAdvisor, availability and pricing, will significantly simplify the process of travel planning (TripAdvisor, 2014f). TripAdvisor demonstrates this by providing an example through a press release, where before choosing a hotel, users can arrange the 'gems' from the 'germs' by browsing through

TripAdvisor's traveler reviews from the map (TripAdvisor, 2014f). TripAdvisor advance their example by mentioning (TripAdvisor, 2014f, p. 1):

"Vacationers looking for an ideal spot between the theme park and the beach can go to the TripAdvisor pages covering Disney World or Universal Studios, and then click on the convenient maps link to see the most popular hotels that are close to the attractions they love. The vacationers can then filter their results by room price and availability right from the map."

Such mashups help travelers to quickly and visually locate hotels around their preferred choice of destination. The map also points out nearby places of interest and recommends places frequented by other travelers who have already been to that area. This feature is useful both for business and leisure travelers. Business travelers can use it to find a property that is close their meeting venue and leisure travelers can easily locate entertainment options through the use of the map.

Figure 11 displays a map mashup with an example of the top 20 hotels in Manhattan, New York City according to travelers' reviews.





Source: TripAdvisor, 2014f.

3.2.7 TripAdvisor Mobile

As a STN, TripAdvisor is constantly working to improve how it connects with its vast user base. As the web moved onto mobile devices so did several services. TripAdvisor incorporates mobile innovation and uses social and GPS technologies to help travelers in their travel planning with features such as 'City Guides' 'Point Me There' and 'Trip Journal' (TripAdvisor, 2014a). Figure 12 presents a collage of the various TripAdvisor mobile features.

First, the '*City Guides*' offer TripAdvisor users' simplified access to detailed information about a destination. This information is also available without constant internet connectivity, making it truly mobile. Travelers can use this feature and enjoy walking tours and browse through insider suggestions, which can be viewed on the application. Travelers can also find detailed information on culture, history, surroundings, architecture, transportation and weather. Access to such offline information is principally useful for travelers abroad, who have an option to download the application prior to their trip, and avoid costly roaming charges.

Second, the 'Point Me There' feature allows a traveler to find particular restaurant, hotel, or attraction at a destination during their travel in a particular city through the use of the phones GPS and compass. Such features are extremely useful to travelers when they are in a foreign country and are not familiar with the vicinity or are unable to read the road signs due to language barrier. Finally, with 'Trip Journal', travelers can conveniently record and document their travels in 82 popular destinations, pre-selected by TripAdvisor. Users can share this information with their friends or other travelers during or after their travels. Moreover, TripAdvisor mobile is available on all main mobile platforms including iOS- Apple, Android- Google, Samsung, iPad/tablet, Windows and Nokia.



Figure 12: TripAdvisor Mobile City Guide, Map, and Point Me There

Source: Apple, 2014a.

3.3 Summary of TripAdvisor

TripAdvisor indeed has a variety of services in offering for tourists. The company has also befitted immensely as discussed with their partnership with Facebook as discussed earlier in this chapter. The business model of TripAdvisor is harnessing the power of the people. Travelers from across the globe are using the services provided by TripAdvisor, and in turn are producing relevant content for TripAdvisor.

However it should also be noted, that TripAdvisor serves both end of the market, supply and the demand side. While tourists do not have to pay anything to TripAdvisor for accessing the site, suppliers such as hoteliers and destination managers have to pay if they wish to have premium real estate on the web page. TripAdvisor derives a large portion of its revenue from advertisements and listing hotels, restaurants and other travel related services.

The company is well positioned in the market and so far does not have any formidable competition. TripAdvisor ranks second out of the top 500 sites associated with travel in the world according to Alexa web ranks during the month of August as documented in appendix C. The only company that ranks higher than TripAdvisor is Booking.com (http://www.booking.com). Booking.com claim to be the world leader in booking accommodations online, where over 750,000 room nights are booked each day (Booking, 2014).

4 METHODOLOGY

This deductive study intends to identify the impact of STNs on travel planning, by understating the associations among ease of use and usefulness of a STN, behavioral intention to using it and level of trust tourists have in such a network. This study is deductive because theories such as TAM and IAM already exist in literature for a long time; however the use of such models in tourism is limited. The research strategy for this research is based on the characteristic of the research question. In pursuance of obtaining a good overview of the impact of TripAdvisor on travel planning, performing a survey with potential travelers who use STNs is a resourceful way to gather representative information about how travelers' travel plans are impacted by such networks. The data is then analyzed through the use of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and results are discussed in the analysis section of this thesis.

4.1 Research Paradigm

In the words of Weaver and Olson's (2006, p. 460) "Paradigms are patterns of beliefs and practices that regulate inquiry within a discipline by providing lenses, frames and processes through which investigation is accomplished." Research paradigm refers to fundamental assumptions about what the world is like and how it should be researched according to a body of literature, and also what the key objects of analysis should be (Shaw, Dixon, & Jones III, 2010).

This research is designed and conducted under the stimulus of a post-positivist paradigm, since it adopts a deductive approach and engages in statistical research analysis. Although the study has elements of different disciplines it is important to understand the epistemological standpoints it adheres to. "Epistemology deals with our understanding of knowledge - that is, how we come to know the world as a site for research and analysis" (Shaw et al., 2010, p. 15). In terms of epistemology, post-positivism is modified dualism or objectivism where experiments are conducted in a more natural setting and data collected is rich with situational information (Guba & Linclon, 1994). Furthermore, according to Willis (2007), post positivism can be viewed as a more welcoming form of positivism. That is because the research uses methods such as surveys and qualitative methods like interviews to collect detailed information and data. Many researchers also consider this paradigm the modified scientific method for social sciences. Thus in this thesis the research will try to explore through experimentation using structural equation modeling (SEM), whether social travel networks, in this case TripAdvisor, do indeed affect the tourists travel planning and try to shed light on whether this effect is positive or negative. An elaborate discussion about SEM is presented in the last section of this chapter.

4.2 Instrument Design

Questionnaires or surveys have been applied as a data collection tool in the social sciences for a long period of time (Chang & Krosnick, 2001; Cook, Heath & Thompson, 2000). Surveys can produce understanding into individual's awareness, opinions, outlooks and sentiments, behavior, or characteristics (Taylor-Powell, 1998).

A questionnaire consists of a set of questions with designated answers. Respondents usually choose among labeled answers and on occasion provide personal opinions if it is asked for in the questionnaire. Questionnaires help to collect and organize data systematically which can then be analyzed statically. Data collected in such a fashion help to explore relationships quickly between predetermined constructs and help researchers to easily perform complex analysis. The development of the survey

instrument consisted of an in depth exploration of the current academic literature as demonstrated in the literature review section of this thesis. Several previous researches were analyzed and the survey instrument designed for such research was given significant consideration before creating this questionnaire.

The approach pursued is comparable to those used in other contexts by Ayeh et al. (2013), Lin (2012), Wu, Lin, & Lin (2011), Ryu, Kim, & Lee (2009) and Venkatesh et al. (2003) in predicting behavioral intention. The items in various constructs were based on the general marketing literature in tourism and information systems. Perceived ease of use (PEOU) items and perceived usefulness (PU), with 5 items each, were collected from the works of Davis et al., (1989). The scales for perceived trustworthiness, 5 items, were derived from research carried out by Ohanian (1990, 1991), the behavioral intention scale, 5 items, were developed based on Ayeh et al., (2013), Davis et al., (1989) and Venkatesh et al., (2003). Table 2 presents the list of contracts and the scale items.

A seven point Likert scale was chosen to measure all the constructs. A seven point Likert scale was preferred over a three or five point scale as it allowed to capture the granular variations in responses received. Preston and Colman (2000) confirmed that the reliability scores levels are significantly higher with scales with seven points, compared to three or five points scale.

Construct	Scale items	Source
Perceived Ease	e of Use (PEOU) – 7 point Likert scale	
PEOU 1	It is easy to learn how to use TripAdvisor	Davis et al., (1989)
PEOU 2	It is easy to use TripAdvisor to find relevant information needed for travel planning	Davis et al., (1989)
PEOU 3	It is easy for me to access TripAdvisor(signup, signin, login, settings)	Davis et al., (1989)
PEOU 4	TripAdvisor website is easy to use to plan my trips	Davis et al., (1989)
PEOU 5	Overall, I find TripAdvisor easy to use	Davis et al., (1989)
Perceived Use	fulness (PU) – 7 point Likert scale	
PU 1	TripAdvisor helps me improve my travel plans	Davis et al. (1989)
PU 2	TripAdvisor helps me to plan my trips more efficiently	Davis et al. (1989)
PU 3	TripAdvisor makes my travel planning easier	Davis et al. (1989)
PU 4	TripAdvisor makes it easier for me to reach travel related decisions	Davis et al. (1989)
PU 5	Overall, I find TripAdvisor useful for travel planning	Davis et al. (1989)
Perceived True	stworthiness (PT) – 7 point Likert scale	
PT 1	Travelers who post content on TripAdvisor are dependable	Ohanian (1990, 1991)
PT 2	Travelers who post content on TripAdvisor are honest	Ohanian (1990, 1991)
PT 3	Travelers who post content on TripAdvisor are reliable	Ohanian (1990, 1991)
PT 4	Travelers who post content on TripAdvisor are sincere	Ohanian (1990, 1991)
PT 5	Travelers who post content on TripAdvisor are trustworthy	Ohanian (1990, 1991)
Behavioral Int	ention to use Information (BITUI) – 7 point Likert scale	
BITU 1	I hesitate to visit TripAdvisor website for travel information (reverse coded)	Ayeh et al. (2013b)
BITU 2	I wish to use travel advice from TripAdvisor	Davis et al. (1989)

Table 2: List of constructs and scale items

BITU 3	I expect to use the content of TripAdvisor to plan my future trips	Ayeh et al. (2013b)		
BITU 4	I make changes to all or parts of my existing travel plans after using the	Ayeh et al. (2013b)		
	content of TripAdvisor			
BITU 5	I intend to use the content of TripAdvisor for my travel planning	Venkatesh	et	al.
	process	(2003)		

4.2.1 Online survey

A survey was created in English, using Obsurvey, professional web-based survey software. A web based survey was preferred over a traditional paper survey because of the several benefits associated with an electronic survey. According to Selm and Jankowski (2006) online questionnaires are useful in research on the topic of internet use, since they let the researcher to reach a population with internet experience. An online survey also allows for access to a diverse sample group: people of different ages, nationalities, etc., target-accessibility, cost-reduction, time-saving, and while possible shortcomings are sampling issue and low response rates (Wright, 2005). Furthermore, with online surveys fast deployment and return times are achievable, which are often not attainable by traditional methods (Evans & Mathur, 2005).

Table 3 outlines the advantages of a web based survey over a traditional paper survey.

Table 5. Benefits of Onnie survey vs. paper survey	Table	3: I	Benefits	of	online	survey	vs.	paper	survey
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Online Survey	Paper Survey
Survey can be tailored logically, and not all questions have to be displayed to all respondents. All respondents also do not have to answer all questions if it does not pertain to them (Selm & Jankowski, 2006.)	Impossible to have logical question distribution. Respondents will usually look at all questions and may confuse themselves and fill in the wrong sections while omitting the relevant section (Medlin, Roy, & Theong, 1999).
Survey can be distributed easily over email, blog, social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, or displayed on a web page (Selm & Jankowski,	Can only be distributed through physical mail or in person.
Easier to read, web pages as they can be zoomed easily for those who may have difficulty reading small prints.	Respondents may find it difficult to read due to print quality, font size or because of the lack of luminosity.
Questions can be split into several virtual pages with a progress bar to help allow respondents to pace themselves accordingly. It is acceptable for respondents to answer several pages online for a survey (Obsurvey, 2014).	Questions can be split into several pages, but it is very troublesome to keep them organized while distributing survey and collecting responses. Respondents also less inclined to participate if they receive a survey that is several pages (Medlin et al., 1999).
Images, colors, logos, sounds and embedded click through links can be easily added, replaced or modified in an online survey (Obsurvey, 2014).	Difficult to change templates due to cost and waste. Does not allow to include rich media. It is also not possible to have clickable links on
Can be done anytime and no physical intervention such as distribution or collection is necessary. Respondents are welcome to complete it anytime they are comfortable, provided they have access to a computer with internet access. Geographic and cultural diversity adds great value to any research (Selm & Jankowski, 2006).	paper. Surveyor usually has to be present to distribute and collect survey. Respondents may feel rushed and complete the survey quickly, however accuracy and quality of data collected may suffer.
Once the survey is completed, the data is immediately collected, sorted and organized in useable format (Wright, 2005).	The surveys need to be gathered, the data then needs to be organized, and collected without error in a useable format.
The cost of an online survey is low or negligible based on number of responses received. As there is usually just one fixed cost for the creation and distribution of survey to unlimited number of participants (Obsurvey, 2014).	The cost varies based on number of participants. Large number of participants incur more printing and distribution costs along with valuable time. This practice is also environmentally unsustainable.

The online self-administered questionnaire was logically distributed over four sections. The first section was the filtering section and used a screen-sample method (Medlin, Roy & Theong, 1999). Therefore this section presented questions that aimed to check if the respondents qualify as STN users. If the respondents did not qualify as STN users, then the survey redirected them to the third section of the survey. The second part of the questionnaire targeted the understanding of the respondents' intentions toward using TripAdvisor for their travel planning. The third section focused to find answers about the respondent's familiarity with other social networks, and travel communities and sites that

generate e-WOM. The final section was used to collect demographic data such as education gender, age and amount of time used on the internet via a categorical scale.

The questions in section one and four were presented as simple close ended questions such as, 'Please check whether or not you have used social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, etc.,' with answer choices of, 'Yes, maybe and no'. The questions for section two were presented with a seven-point Likert scale, from 1 being strongly disagree to 7 being strongly agree. The second part also contained four parameters based on the defined hypotheses, namely usefulness, ease of use, trustworthiness and behavioral intention to use. Each parameter included five question items to collect ample amount of data to test the hypotheses. A copy of the complete final survey is presented in Appendix D.

A pilot survey was deployed to test the questionnaire. According to Ticehurst and Veal (2000) the purpose of pilot surveys is to test the questionnaire wording, sequence and layout. They further recommended that the researcher should estimate the response time and design testing procedures. This was done also in this research where prior to distributing the final survey, a pilot survey was sent to 15 students, completing their tourism masters, to assess the comprehensiveness of the survey in the wording, order, and layout. The feedback about the pilot survey received was positive with recommendations for minor aesthetic and wording adjustments. Several changes were made to the pilot survey and a final survey was thus created. Afterwards, the final survey was distributed over Facebook, and on professional travel networks on LinkedIn.

4.3 Sampling and data collection

Traditionally sampling is divided between probability and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling is mostly used for web based research surveys (Saunders, Lewuis, & Thornhill, 2000). The authors suggested this because the researcher is able to make inferences about the population from the sample of responses collected, and answer the research questions. When probability sampling is executed properly, it ensures the sample is a clear representation of the population (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). This study focuses on travelers' who are part of STN, TripAdvisor. However to get a true picture of the population who are part of STNs the survey was not limited to only TripAdvisor users.

This research collected data from a sample and generalized it to the population. To achieve a good sample that is representative, the survey was sent out to the author's social network on Facebook and two LinkedIn groups. World Tourism Network and International Tourism Studies Association were the two LinkedIn groups where the survey was shared. LinkedIn was chosen to administer the survey, because it is a source of reliable information for the author, due to the professional nature of the network.

LinkedIn defines the company as, "The world's largest professional network: 300 million strong" (LinkedIn, 2014, p. 1).

The author's social network on Facebook, and the responses from LinkedIn provided a true representation of the population because of the diversity in age, gender and location of the people on his Facebook network and the location of the respondents on LinkedIn. The survey did not require any of the respondents to mention where they were located. Although it is a bit unorthodox and may appear as skepticism, the author is confident that the information will provide enough evidence to support the sample of responses gathered to be a representation of the population at large.

The following information provided is from the author's personal social network on Facebook.





Source: Authors personal Facebook page, 2014.

Figure 13, above collected from Facebook, represents the gender ratio of the authors Facebook network. Of the 522 people that specified their gender, 56 % identified themselves as female and 43 % were identified as male. This ratio of gender is considerably similar to the ratio of the male and female respondents of the survey. While this does not confirm that the sample represented here is the exact sample that completed the survey. However it provides evidence enough to scrutinize further data about the author's social network to explore other similarities that can prove the diversity of the sample and its validity to be representative of the population.

Figure 14, presents the age diversity. The youngest friend on the authors Facebook is 20 years old with the oldest at 80 years of age. The average age of the individuals who shared this information was around 29. This information also relates to the information gathered from the survey. SPSS analysis proved that the average are of the respondents was about 30. The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in chapter 6 under the socio-demographic profile section.

Figure 14: Age distribution



Source: Authors personal Facebook page, 2014.

Figure 15, below represents the geographic diversity of the friends on the author's social network. The friends, who shared their geographic location, represented 159 cities, 93 states and 35 countries.



Figure 15: Geographic Distribution of Social Network

Source: Authors personal Facebook page, 2014.

These data provide strong evidence that the sample who received the survey is a clear representation of the population. Furthermore, information gathered from the participants on LinkedIn who left comments for the survey in the group; provide proof of a varied diversity in their geographic location. The 24 respondents from LinkedIn represent 17 countries. Table 4 presents the list of the 17 countries, which were represented by the individuals who participated on the survey through LinkedIn.

Geographic Location of LinkedIn Respondents									
Argentina	Iran	Nepal	Switzerland						
Australia	Israel	Portugal	Thailand						
Bangladesh	Italy	Slovenia	United Kingdom						
India	Mexico	South Africa	USA						
Vietnam									

Table 4: List of countries represented by LinkedIn respondents

The survey was conducted in the period from June 1 to 28, 2014. Participation was completely voluntary and no form of incentive was provided. The entire survey took approximately seven to ten minutes to complete. On June 10, 2014; a reminder to complete the survey was posted on Facebook and LinkedIn groups. An email reminder was also sent to all those who received the survey link in their email but did not complete the survey. Moreover, a second reminder to complete the survey was sent out on 20th of June, 2014. Obsurvey made it possible to limit the same respondents taking the survey multiple times, by allowing each unique internet protocol (IP) address to complete the survey once. If a respondent opened the survey in a previous occasion, however did not complete it; was allowed to redo the survey. Upon completion of the survey, each respondent was thanked for their time and effort in completing the survey.

At the conclusion of the survey a total of 223 respondents attempted the survey. However, only 212 respondents actually completed the survey. The data collected were screened for quality control. Out of a total of 212 responses, 16 were vetted out because of numerous reasons such as outliers and clear lack of engagement with the survey or missing cases. Of the 196 qualified responses, 150 were identified as STN users who use both: a social networking site, Facebook or Twitter and a travel networking site TripAdvisor.

Further proof about the sample being a good representation of the population is achieved by presenting the authors personal STN information. As demonstrated in Figure 16 it is clearly observable that 134 of his friends from the Facebook network also use TripAdvisor and they are spread across the globe in various countries. Since the survey was only distributed on his personal social network and on two other LinkedIn groups, there is a clear representation of a global sample in terms of geographic standpoint. Detailed socio-demographic profile of the respondents is presented in chapter 5.



Figure 16: Author's Social Travel Network

Source: Author's personal Facebook page, 2014.

Obsurvey allowed all the data collected to be downloaded in excel spreadsheet format. The data was then converted into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 for analysis. SPSS was chosen over other data analysis tool because of the nature of the research questions; and the user friendly graphical user interface it provided for data analysis. Furthermore, analysis of moment structures (AMOS) an add-on for SPSS 22.0 allowed for multivariate data analysis which is known as structural equation modeling (SEM). In addition causal modeling and structural modeling can be easily done using AMOS. The AMOS computer program uses Bayesian analysis to improve the estimates of model parameters and compute complex processes such as analysis of variance (ANOVA), path analysis, multi regression and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) (Arbuckle, 2009).

Established within the framework of Microsoft Windows Interface, AMOS uses an intuitive graphical user interface. Researchers can easily create measurement models and perform confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and later use path diagrams for their structural model and perform complex operations quickly using AMOS. According to Tang and Jia (2011) the measurement model on one side involves connecting observed variables to a set of unobserved or latent variables through confirmatory factor analysis. On the other side is the structural equation model a causal relationship among the latent variables (Tang & Jia, 2011).

According to Tang and Jia (2011) there are several other software's present in the market to compute linear structural relations and moment structure such as EQS, Multiple plus

and LISREL, AMOS is considered most popular for its competitive advantage. Confirmatory factor analysis which is considered one of most strict methodological approaches can be easily performed using AMOS within the framework of structural equation modeling (Tang & Jia, 2011). This research favors AMOS because of its ability to clearly and concisely compute and present reports of preliminary analyses, model specification, parameter estimation, goodness of fit and the ability to ensure the validity of dimensions structures.

In recent days, SEM has captivated the interest of many academics as a frequently used method used to analyze data (Table 5). According to Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, & Gursoy (2013), SEM creates the opportunity for academics to research real-life scenarios and "provides a useful forum for sense-making and in so doing link philosophy of science to theoretical and empirical research" (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012, p. 12). SEM is a statistical practice for testing measurement, functional, and predictive hypotheses that approximate world realities (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). The SEM technique allows for checking and examining a structural model by generating goodness of fit statistics and assessing the overall fit (Ho, 2006).

Year	TM	JTR	JTTM	ATR	TA	IJTR	JOST	JVM	APJTR	Total	%
2000	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	1.4
2001	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	4	1.9
2002	1	3	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	9	4.3
2003	1	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	6	2.9
2004	2	4	2	3	2	0	0	0	0	13	6.2
2005	5	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	9	4.3
2006	9	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	14	6.7
2007	9	4	1	2	2	2	0	0	0	20	9.6
2008	8	5	3	5	3	5	1	0	1	31	14.8
2009	6	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	0	22	10.5
2010	8	6	13	0	4	2	3	2	3	41	19.6
2011	18	5	3	3	2	4	1	1	0	37	17.7
Total	69	35	27	24	19	16	7	7	5	209	100
%	33.0	16.7	12.9	11.5	9.1	7.7	3.3	3.3	2.4	-	100

Table 5: SEM based articles listed by journal and year of publication

Note. SEM - Structural Equation Modeling; TM - Tourism Management; JTR - Journal of Travel Research; JTTM - Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing; ATR - Annals of Tourism Research; TA - Tourism Analysis; IJTR - International Journal of Tourism Research; JOST - Journal of Sustainable Tourism; JVM - Journal of Vacation Marketing; APJTR - Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research.

SEM is a complex composite that merges features of factor analysis (representing unmeasured concepts-factors with multiple variables) and multiple regression (examining dependence relationships) to asses a series of interrelated dependence relationships at the same time (Hair et al., 2006, McDonald & Ho, 2002). The

measurement model of SEM, being acknowledged also as the confirmatory factor model, illustrates the pattern of observed variables for the latent variables in the hypothesized model.

According to Schumacker and Lomax (2004) confirmatory factor analysis is being utilized to evaluate the capacity of the measurement model. Items with high factor loadings have to correctly signify the latent variable in the model and the ones being weakly correlated with others, poorly define the variable. Hoyle (1995) added that SEM's structural component is a hypothetical model that stipulates relationships among latent variables and their observed variables. It relates the variables to other variables by making path coefficients for each hypothesized relationships (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012; Crockett, 2012; McDonald & Ho, 2002; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Weston & Gore Jr., 2006).

Therefore, because of the exemplary benefits of SEM in testing hypothesis, this research favors to use SEM in its data analysis. According to Jöreskog (1993) SEM models can be tested using three distinct strategic frameworks. First is the strictly confirmatory, second the alternative model and finally model generation.

This dissertation employs the third model generation strategy. That is because, of the ability to speculate and discard the derived model on the grounds of poor fit in model generation and to have the ability to modify and re-estimate the model. Model generation allows locating the source of problem for a predicted model and allows manipulating it to be helping create a model that best estimates the data.

5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter the study results are put together. As mentioned previously, the data gathered was analyzed with SPSS 22.0 for Windows, in conjunction with AMOS. The first part presents the socio-demographic profile of the respondents followed by the empirical analysis section and hypothesis evaluation. The empirical analysis consists of exploratory factor analysis (hereinafter EFA) from SPSS and confirmatory factor analysis (hereinafter CFA) from AMOS, and SEM model is used for the hypothesis evaluation.

5.1 Socio-demographic Profile

As mentioned previously in the paper, the survey was available to individuals on the author's social network on Facebook and on two forums on LinkedIn. The respondents were screened in the first section of the survey into STN and non STN users. Of the 196 acceptable responses, 46 respondents were identified as non STN users and 76.5% or 150 respondents also identified themselves as social network users by answering, 'Yes', to the first two screening questions. Therefore, in this research, these 150 respondents are

considered as STN users. Henceforth, EFA, CFA and results of the SEM is based on the sample size of n = 150.

It is clearly evident from the data collected that majority of the respondents were using either Facebook or Twitter as a social network as 97.4 % of them answered with a, 'Yes', to the question, 'Have you used Facebook or Twitter within the past 6 months?' However only 76.5 % of the respondents identified themselves as TripAdvisor users by answering the question, 'Have you used TripAdvisor (TA) to search for travel related information (accommodation, destination, transportation, etc.) within the last 12 months?'

Among all the respondents, two thirds were female and one third was male. Greater parts of the respondents were between the ages 18 to 30 with a total of 61.7%. Most of the participants were well educated with a total of 80.6 % with at least a bachelor's degree as their highest education received till date.

Among the STN users, the male to female ratio and education was similar to the entire sample. However noticeable differences were present in the internet usage segment. 98% of the 150 respondents were either constantly connected or browsed the internet several times a day. It was also observable that more of the STN users were planning a trip within the next 12 months with over 85%.

Table 6 below presents the all the socio demographic information related to the entire valid dataset of n = 196 and for the STN users with n = 150.

		SPSS value	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
			n* = 196	n* = 196	n = 150	n = 150
Uses Social Network	No	1	5	2.6	0	0.0
	Yes	3	191	97.4	146	100.0
(USN) Uses	No	1	46	23.5	0	0
TripAdviso r (UTA)	Yes	3	150	76.5	150	100.0
Gender	Male	1	66	33.7	48	32.0
(Gen)	Female	2	130	66.3	102	68.0
Age	Less than 18	1	0	0	0	0
	18-30	2	121	61.7	90	60.0
	31-40	3	36	18.4	26	17.3
	41-50	4	15	7.7	13	8.7
	51-60	5	11	5.6	9	6.0
	60+	6	13	6.6	12	8.0
Education (Edu)	High School/Secondary Education	1	17	8.7	11	7.3
	Diploma/Associates Degree	2	16	8.2	12	8.0

Table 6: Summary of Socio-demographic profile

	Bachelor's Degree	3	102	52.0	75	50.0
	Graduate/Post Graduate Degree	4	56	28.6	47	31.3
	Other	5	5	2.6	5	3.3
						(table continues)
(continued)						
Internet Use (IUse)	Maximum 10 times a month of less	1	1	.5	0	0.0
	At least 5 times a week	2	4	2.0	0	0.0
	About once a day	3	5	2.6	3	2.0
	Several times a day	4	109	55.6	84	56.0
	Constantly connected Mobile internet	5	77	39.3	63	42.0
Travel Pan	No	1	7	3.6	4	2.7
(TPlan)	Maybe	2	29	14.8	18	12.0
	Yes	3	160	81.6	128	85.3

Note. $n^*=196$ represent entire dataset and n=150 represent only STN respondents

Further analysis, using descriptive statistics reveals that there were no major anomalies in the socio demographic profile of the respondents. However, some of the strong Kurtosis values noticeable are due to the fact that majority of the responses are similar in terms of social network usage, internet usage and travel plans. Data in Table 7 presents the descriptive statistics for the all and STN respondents.

	Uses S Netv (US	Social work SN)	Us TripA (U7	es dvisor TA)	Gende	r (Gen)	A	ge	Educati	on (Edu)	Intern (IU	et Use Jse)	Trave (TP	l Plan lan)
N	196	150	196	150	196	150	196	150	196	150	196	150	196	150
Mean	2.94	3.00	2.53	3.00	1.66	1.68	2.77	2.85	3.08	3.15	4.31	4.40	2.78	2.83
Median	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	3.00
Mode	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	3.00
Std. Deviation	0.32	0.00	0.85		.47	0.47	1.21	1.28	0.90	0.90	0.67	0.53	0.49	0.44
Skewness	-6.07		-1.26		70	-0.78	1.55	1.41	-0.67	-0.65	-1.28	0.00	-2.22	-2.62
Std. Error of	0.17	0.20	0.17	0.20	0.17	0.20	0.17	0.20	0.17	0.20	0.17	0.20	0.17	0.20
Skewness Kurtosis	35.14		-0.41		-1.53	-1.41	1.27	0.73	0.54	0.63	3.90	-1.14	4.20	6.40
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.35	0.39	0.35	0.39	0.35	0.39	0.35	0.39	0.35	0.39	0.35	0.39	0.35	0.39

Table 7: Summary of descriptive statistics

Note. n = 196 for entire dataset, n = 150 for STN

5.2 Empirical Analysis

This section only uses the sample of 150 respondents only, who were identified as STN users for all of the computations and analysis.

5.2.1 Sample size for SEM

Hair et al. (2006) discussed that a sample size that is at least one hundred observations is being recommended to attain satisfactory power in structural equation modeling. Sample size is a critical subject in SEM and has an important effect on reliability of parameter estimates, model fit. However, Nunkoo et al. (2013) found that majority of the recent tourism research usually use a sample size of about 151 or more respondents. Furthermore, Holbert and Stephenson (2003) found out that 27% of SEM models in communication sciences drew out on a sample lower than 150. Similarly, Kline (2010) claimed that if the number of sample cases is below 100, the results are considered to have a low degree of reliability. It is estimated that studies with between 100 and 200 cases are considered to have a high degree of reliability. However, it is suggested that the size of the sample should also be proportionate to the number of estimated parameters (Jenatabadi & Ismail, 2014). Henceforth, the sample size of 150 is considered above adequate for this research.

5.2.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

To ensure that the data obtained was reliable, advanced multivariate analyses were performed. Reliability and validity of the measurement is suggested when executing SEM (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). This helps to understand and explore the mutual correlation of selected factors. The factors being perceived ease of use, perceives usefulness, perceives trustworthiness and behavioral intention to use information from STN, TripAdvisor.

First, all the response factors were analyzed for errors or anomalies by studying their Kurtosis and Skewness. A greater part of statistics in SEM calls for the data set to be multivariate normal (Weston & Gore, 2006). Nothing significant was found in the data set for the construct responses after performing a descriptive statistic test on the factor constructs. Table 8 presents the summary of the results from descriptive statistics of the factor constructs.

	Ν	Mean	Median	Mode	Std.	Skewness	Kurtosis
	Valid				Deviation		
Perceived U	Jsefulness (I	PU)					
PU 1	150	5.27	5.00	5.00	1.16	-0.59	0.36
PU 2	150	4.97	5.00	5.00	1.29	-0.53	0.47
PU 3	150	4.89	5.00	5.00	1.15	-0.35	-0.04
PU 4	150	5.02	5.00	5.00	1.21	-0.53	0.50
PU 5	150	5.33	5.00	6.00	1.15	-0.40	0.14
Perceived E	ase of Use ((PEOU)					
PEOU 1	150	5.55	6.00	7.00	1.29	-0.80	0.63
PEOU 2	150	5.25	5.00	6.00	1.09	-0.64	0.70
PEOU 3	150	5.47	6.00	7.00	1.38	-0.84	0.56
PEOU 4	150	5.25	5.00	5.00	1.10	-0.49	0.55
PEOU 5	150	5.18	5.00	5.00	1.27	-0.62	0.80
Behavioral	Intention to	use Informati	on (BITUI)				
BITUI 1	150	5.07	5.00	5.00	1.53	-0.57	-0.24
BITUI 2	150	4.70	5.00	4.00	1.17	-0.42	0.67
BITUI 3	150	4.93	5.00	5.00	1.34	-0.34	-0.30
BITUI 4	150	4.25	4.00	5.00	1.23	-0.08	0.08
BITUI 5	150	4.83	5.00	5.00	1.22	-0.41	0.79
Perceived T	rustworthin	ess (PT)					
PT 1	150	4.54	4.50	4.00	1.16	-0.16	-0.58
PT 2	150	4.80	5.00	5.00	1.07	-0.58	-0.65
PT 3	150	4.61	5.00	6.00	1.21	-0.30	-0.77
PT 4	150	4.78	5.00	6.00	1.09	-0.40	-0.79
PT 5	150	4.49	5.00	5.00	1.14	-0.35	-0.13

Table 8: Descriptive statistics of the factor constructs

In order to confirm the relevance of principal components analysis (data reduction procedure) for the data set, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was used, to examine whether the strength of the relationship between variables was large enough to proceed to a factor analysis. Table 9 presents the results of the KMO and Bartlett's test of sphercity.

Table 9: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's test of sphericity

		Observed value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of S	.900	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (χ^{2})	Approx. Chi-Square	1909.528
	Df	171
	Sig.	.000

The KMO for the dataset was .900 which is much higher than Kaiser's (1974) recommended minimum threshold of 0.5 and Bartlett's test of sphericity (χ^2) = 1909.528. Following the KMO measure, factor extraction was performed with the maximum likelihood criteria and factors were extracted based on eigenvalues of 1.0. In the same

time, promax rotation at Kappa 4 was applied and all small coefficients with absolute values below 0.40 were suppressed. The total variance summary and the pattern matrix for the dataset is presented in Tables 10 and 11 respectively.

Factor		Initial Eigen	values	Extracti	on Sums of Squ	ared Loadings	Rotation Sums of
							Squared Loadings ^a
	Total	% of	Cumulative	Total	% of	Cumulative	Total
		Variance	%		Variance	%	
1	8.231	43.322	43.322	7.822	41.167	41.167	5.616
2	2.305	12.130	55.452	1.909	10.045	51.212	5.833
3	1.920	10.107	65.559	1.666	8.771	59.983	4.788
4	1.264	6.651	72.210	.949	4.994	64.977	5.937

Table 10: Total variance based on Eigenvalues

Note. Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood.

a. When factors are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance. Factors: 1 – Perceived Trustworthiness, 2 – Perceived Usefulness, 3 – Perceived Ease of Use, 4 – Behavioral Intention to use Information.

Table 11: Scale reliability and	d factorial validity
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Scale items	Factor loadings
Factor 1: Perceived Trustworthiness (PT)	
Travelers who post content on TripAdvisor are trustworthy (PT 5)	.909
Travelers who post content on TripAdvisor are reliable (PT 3)	.907
Travelers who post content on TripAdvisor are sincere (PT 4)	.790
Travelers who post content on TripAdvisor are dependable (PT 1)	.776
Travelers who post content on TripAdvisor are honest (PT 2)	.762
Factor 2: Perceived Usefulness (PU)	
Overall, I find TripAdvisor useful for travel planning (PU 5)	.908
TripAdvisor helps me improve my travel plans (PU 1)	.825
TripAdvisor makes my travel planning easier (PU 3)	.752
TripAdvisor helps me to plan my trips more efficiently (PU 2)	.733
TripAdvisor makes it easier for me to reach travel related decisions (PU 4)	.731
Factor 3: Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)	
Overall, I find TripAdvisor easy to use (PEOU 5)	.829
It is easy to learn how to use TripAdvisor (PEOU 1)	.824
It is easy to use TripAdvisor to find relevant information needed for travel planning	.775
(PEOU 2)	
It is easy for me to access TripAdvisor(signup, signin, login, settings) (PEOU 3)	.623
TripAdvisor website is easy to use to plan my trips (PEOU 4)	.606
Factor 4: Behavioral Intention to use Information (BITUI)	
I intend to use the content of TripAdvisor for my travel planning process (BITUI 5)	.892
I expect to use the content of TripAdvisor to plan my future trips (BITUI 3)	.786
I make changes to all or parts of my existing travel plans after using the content of	.758
TripAdvisor (BITUI 4)	
I wish to use travel advice from TripAdvisor (BITUI 2)	.723
Note. Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood. All absolute values below .4 were suppressed	ed
Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.	
a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.	

As observable in Table 11, the factor for item, BITU 1, 'I hesitate to visit TripAdvisor website for travel information', contrast was suppressed during factor extraction as it is below 0.40 and is deemed low. Following this output, this factor will not be used in further estimations as the low value indicates that this factor does not fit well with the factor solution.

Furthermore, all the survey constructs, except demographic data, were tested for questionnaire reliability. Reliability of a construct is measured by examining the indicator reliability and composite reliability (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). This thesis used the Cronbach's method to test the constructs internal consistency. Cronbach's Alpha (α) helped to determine whether the questions were really useful from the survey and helped avoid misleading data. Alpha values of between 0.60 and 0.70 in exploratory research and above 0.70 advanced research are considered appropriate (Cronbach & Shavelson, 2004). A summary of the Cronbach's Alpha of each construct is presented in Table 12.

Table 12: Reliability of constructs

Variable Name	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)	5	.859
Perceived Usefulness (PU)	5	.896
Perceived Trustworthiness (PT)	5	.922
Behavioral Intention to Use Information (BITUI)	4	.882

All constructs derived has high α value, varying between 0.882 and 0.922. This confirmed that the information acquired can thus be used for confirmatory factor analysis and model building. Henceforth, the proposed research model is considered dependable. The factor correlation and inter item correlations for the dataset are presented below in Table 13 and 14 respectively.

Table 13: Factor correlation matrix

PT	PU	PEOU	BITUI				
1.000	.502	.377	.527				
.502	1.000	.426	.630				
.377	.426	1.000	.554				
.527	.630	.554	1.000				
Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.							
	PT 1.000 .502 .377 .527	PT PU 1.000 .502 .502 1.000 .377 .426 .527 .630	PT PU PEOU 1.000 .502 .377 .502 1.000 .426 .377 .426 1.000 .527 .630 .554				

	PU 1	PU 2	<u>PU 3</u>	<u>PU 4</u>	<u>PU 5</u>	PEOU 1	PEOU 2	PEOU 3	PEOU 4	PEOU 5	BITUI 2	<u>BITUI</u> 3	BITUI 4	<u>BITUI 5</u>	PT 1	PT 2	PT 3	PT 4	PT 5
Perceived Usefulness (PU 1)	1.00																		
Perceived Usefulness (PU 2)	.65	1.00																	
Perceived Usefulness (PU 3)	.61	.55	1.00																
Perceived Usefulness (PU 4)	.68	.61	.56	1.00															
Perceived Usefulness (PU 5)	.70	.68	.66	.64	1.00														
Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU 1)	.20	.22	.18	.20	.20	1.00													
Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU 2)	.21	.26	.24	.26	.20	.65	1.00												
Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU 3)	.30	.21	.27	.26	.25	.52	.46	1.00											
Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU 4)	.39	.39	.29	.31	.42	.43	.49	.56	1.00										
Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU 5)	.34	.32	.26	.31	.34	.60	.64	.52	.67	1.00									
Behavioral Intention to use Information (BITUI 2)	.43	.42	.32	.45	.40	.27	.38	.29	.41	.31	1.00								
Behavioral Intention to use Information (BITUL3)	.52	.45	.40	.46	.41	.34	.39	.39	.46	.45	.64	1.00							
Behavioral Intention to use Information (BITUL4)	.38	.36	.24	.37	.32	.22	.26	.33	.36	.29	.59	.57	1.00						
Behavioral Intention to use Information (BITUL 5)	.51	.47	.45	.51	.47	.28	.35	.39	.50	.45	.69	.78	.65	1.00					
Perceived Trustworthiness (PT 1)	.24	.41	.24	.25	.34	.16	.21	.15	.28	.29	.35	.26	.31	.33	1.00				
Perceived Trustworthiness (PT 2)	.33	.32	.37	.31	.40	.17	.32	.20	.28	.28	.40	.44	.33	.42	.61	1.00			
Perceived Trustworthiness (PT 3)	.33	.43	.31	.30	.41	.30	.33	.28	.35	.38	.43	.45	.34	.46	.73	.73	1.00		
Perceived Trustworthiness (PT 4)	.36	.44	.32	.43	.47	.15	.22	.15	.24	.20	.39	.38	.33	.43	.60	.70	.72	1.00	
Perceived Trustworthiness (PT 5)	.32	.43	.31	.36	.40	.19	.30	.18	.28	.31	.41	.45	.33	.41	.63	.72	.83	.77	1.00

Table 14: Inter item correlation matrix

5.2.3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

To confirm the analysis of fit, confirmatory factor analysis was performed. The CFA measurement model involved the four latent variables as stated earlier in the section (Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), Perceived Usefulness (PU), Perceived Trustworthiness (PT) and Behavioral Intention to use Information (BITUI)).

The CFA Measurement Model presented in Figure 17 is the primary step in the two step approach to Structural Equation Modeling as discussed in Schumacker and Lomax (2004). This allows the researcher to evaluate the involvement of each scale item and determine how well the scale measures the concept (Hair et al., 2006). To analyze the CFA model, the Maximum Likelihood method was used.

The CFA was assessed for any offending estimates. Examples of offending estimates include: a) negative error variances for any construct; b) standardized coefficients exceeding or very close to 1.0; or c) very large standard errors associated with any estimated coefficient. It is permissible to remove any construct where the correlation of the standardized solution exceed 1.0 (Hair et al., 2006).





The second step in the analysis was to determine the model fit. A maximum likelihood method was used to estimate the models parameters. The results of the fit indices for the CFA measurement model are presented below in Table 15.

	$CMIN(\chi^2)$	DF 1	Р	$CMIN(\chi^2)/DF$	RMSEA	PCLOSE	NFI	GFI	TLI	CFI
Observed value	186.301	1450.0	012	1.285	0.044	0.706	0.907	0.889	0.973	0.977
Suggested value				≤ 3.0	≤ 0.08		≥.90	≥.90	≥.90	≥.90

Table 15: Summary of model fit indices

Note. Suggested values were adapted based on recommendations from Hair et al. (2006)

The Normed Fit Index (NFI), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Tucker-Lewis Coefficient (TLI) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) are all very close to or higher than 0.90 which is the recommended minimum values according to Hair et al. (2006). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is well under the threshold of 1.00 (Hair et al., 2006; Schumacker & Lomax, 2004), indicating good model fit for the sample size. Furthermore, according to Kline (1998) chi square statistic (CMIN/DF) values lower than 3.0 are satisfactory. The CMIN/DF for the model tested resulted with a value of 1.285 which is below the recommended value. Taking these outputs into consideration fit indices support the construct validity of the individual constructs in the model.

The model had 190 distinct sample moments, 45 distinct parameters to be estimated and 145 degrees of freedom. The highest correlation observed was between (Perceived Usefulness and Behavioral Intention to use Information) at 5.721 and no negative correlations were produced. All parameters were acceptable as they all exceeded the recommended t-value greater than 1.96 (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). Table 16 presents the findings of the correlations for the CFA measurement model.

Covariances		Estimate	S.E.	C.R.
Perceived Usefulness	<-> Behavioral Intention to use Information	0.719	0.126	5.721
Perceived Ease of Use	<-> Behavioral Intention to use Information	0.744	0.138	5.406
Perceived Trustworthiness	<-> Behavioral Intention to use Information	0.646	0.122	5.282
Perceived Usefulness	<-> Perceived Trustworthiness	0.517	0.103	5.012
Perceived Ease of Use	<-> Perceived Usefulness	0.504	0.111	4.552
Perceived Ease of Use	<-> Perceived Trustworthiness	0.463	0.111	4.183

Table 16: Correlations for CFA measurement model

Note. S.E.(Standard Error), C.R. (Critical Ratio)

To further support the reliability of the model, the variance for each of the latent variables were looked into. The findings were reliable as all of the critical ratios were above 1.96 at the 0.5 level of significance. The findings are listed in Table 17 below.

Dimension	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.
Perceived Ease of Use	1.159	0.191	6.072
Perceived Usefulness	0.949	0.151	6.274
Perceived Trustworthiness	1.050	0.150	7.018
Behavioral Intention to use Information	1.287	0.205	6.277

Table 17: Variances for CFA measurement Model

Note. S.E. - Standard Error, C.R. - Critical Ratio.

The results of CFA proved to produce a good model fit for the proposed model. Henceforth, the convergent validity and discriminant validity were calculated to estimate if the model was reliable. To achieve this, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were computed. CR values are recommended to be above 0.6 and AVE to be higher than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2006). The outcomes of the reliability analysis along with the maximum shared variance (MSV) and average shared variance (ASV) are presented in Table 18.

Table 18: Construct reliability, convergent validity

	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	РТ	PEOU	PU	BITUI
Perceived Trustworthiness (PT)	0.923	0.707	0.309	0.250	0.841			
Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)	0.863	0.559	0.350	0.245	0.415	0.748		
Perceived Usefulness (PU)	0.898	0.639	0.424	0.301	0.517	0.460	0.799	
Behavioral Intention to use	0.884	0.658	0.424	0.361	0.556	0.592	0.651	0.811
Information (BITUI)								

Note. Numbers in bold are the square root of average variance extracted from observed variables.

All the factors were found to have adequate validity and discriminant validity. This proved that the model was ready to be analyzed using structural equation modeling. The subsequent part of this chapter introduces the SEM model and tests the relationship among constructs.

5.3 Structural Equation Model (SEM)





The SEM model in figure 18 has two exogenous (Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Perceived Trust (PT)) and two endogenous variables (Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Behavioral Intention to Use Information (BITUI)). The two exogenous variables have been co-varied as demonstrated to allow for the proper model fit. Table 19 presents the result of hypothesis testing using the SEM.

	Hypothesized Relationship	Standardized Estimate(β)	C.R.	P value	Study results	Interpretation
H1	PU ← PEOU	0.32	3.532	***	Supported	PEOU has positive direct effect on PU
H2	BITUI ←PEOU	0.34	3.996	***	Supported	PEOU has positive direct effect on BITUI
H3	BITUI ← PU	0.38	4.266	***	Supported	PU has positive direct effect on BITUI
H4	PU ← PT	0.38	4.386	***	Supported	PU has positive direct effect on PT
H5	BITUI ← PT	0.22	2.754	0.006	Supported	PT has positive direct effect on BITUI at probability level < .01

Table 19: Summary of results of hypothesis testing using SEM

Note. *** Correlation is significant at the level \leq .001, PU-Perceived Usefulness, PEOU- Perceived Ease of Use, BITUI-Behavioral Intention to use Information, PT – Perceived Trustworthiness, C.R.- Critical Ratio also known as t-value.

5.3.1 Analysis: Perceived Ease of Use

H1: Perceived ease of using a STN positively influences perceived usefulness of it for travel planning. The null hypothesis is rejected as the standardized estimate (β) = 0.32 at p \leq .001. Furthermore, H2: Perceived ease of using a STN positively influences the behavioral intention to use information from it. The null hypothesis here is also rejected as (β) = 0.34 at p \leq .001. These results are comparable to the findings of Ayeh et al. (2013); Xu et al. (2010); Davis (1989); Venkatesh & Davis (2000), and Castañeda, et al., (2009).

Users who find things easy to use are more prone to use them, and TripAdvisor is making sure of it with their efforts. The company is constantly revamping their website to improve their user experience, asking users about their user experience through regular surveys and through the use of forums (TripAdvisor, 2014g). As of August 2014, there are about 10,017 topics on the forum titled, 'Help up make TripAdvisor better! Forum' (TripAdvisor, 2014g).

Furthermore, as TripAdvisor connected with Facebook and allowed users to use Facebook Login for TripAdvisor, the ease of use of using TA significantly increased as discussed in chapter 4. With the streamlined login process across devices, such as mobile phones, iPads and other internet connected devices and allowing users to communicate and relate to their friends and social network quickly in real time
through the use of Facebook. This is also consistent with the results of this study as one of the highest factor loading was for the item perceived ease of use, was that users overall found TripAdvisor easy to use.

In addition, these findings narrate to the ideas as presented by Davis et al. (1989), that ease of use is related to easily comprehensible functions, simplicity of use and speed of information gathering. With TripAdvisor's constant vigilance to upgrade their servers, improve user interface and relevancy of information provided it makes clear sense that travelers find it useful. However it should be noted that not all travelers found it easy to use TripAdvisor to get the relevant information required for their travel plans. The graph below in Figure 19 demonstrates the opinions of the 150 STN users from the survey conducted for this dissertation. While a large majority of the respondents slightly and moderately agree that it is easy to find relevant information on TripAdvisor; there is a significant number of respondents who disagree or take a neutral stance.



Figure 19: Differences in opinion - Perceived ease of use

Further findings also suggest that men tend to struggle a bit more with TripAdvisor than women, who seem to find it much easier to use. Women on average find it easier to learn, access, find relevant information and ultimately find the site useful for their travel plans; whereas men tend to have disagreement in their responses where some find it difficult to learn how to use TripAdvisor and access it easily. These findings are reported as a graph in Figure 20. Each graph goes left to right; between strongly disagree to strongly agree.



Figure 20: Difference between male and female perception about ease of use

5.3.2 Analysis: Perceived Usefulness

H3: Perceived usefulness of a STN positively influences the behavioral intention to use information from it for travel planning. The null hypothesis is rejected in this scenario as the standardized estimate (β) = 0.38 at p \leq .001. Venkatesh (2000), Chen & Chen (2011), and Venkatesh & Davis (2000) also had similar findings in previous research regarding the effect of usefulness on intent. The theory about usefulness having direct effect on intention of using information is this true.

Some other reasons that perhaps make TripAdvisor useful to travelers is the fact that it does not charge users any money for using the service. Coupled with the several benefits and no monetary obligations to the site, users tend to take a favorable position about TripAdvisor's usefulness.

These findings relate to a report by Nielsen.com (2014), which mentioned that 13.2 million travelers headed online as summer vacation approached, not only to book and secure hotel rooms and flights, but also to find information about their travel plans on TripAdvisor (Nielsen, 2014). Henceforth it can be deduced that once a user considers TripAdvisor to be useful, he or she is more willing to use the information provided on the site to help with their travel plans. The graphs below in Figure 21 represent subsets of STN users, who answered, 'No, Maybe and Yes', to the question if they are likely to plan a trip in the next 12 months along with their perspective on usefulness of TripAdvisor. The results show a clear difference among the three segments. Those who plan to travel on average tend to find TripAdvisor significantly more useful

versus those that do not plan to or may travel within the next 12 months. Each graph goes left to right; between strongly disagree to strongly agree.



Figure 21: Subsets of STN users and their upcoming travel plans

5.3.3 Analysis: Perceived Trustworthiness

H4: Perceived trustworthiness of a STN positively influences the perceived usefulness of it for travel planning. The null hypothesis is rejected as the value for the standardized estimate (β) = 0.38 at p \leq .001. These findings are not as similar as earlier research as the β value observed is much higher than previous research. This perhaps because of the massive extension of TripAdvisor into the social network scene. Users now find it more reliable and trustworthy than before and are more inclined to use it for their travel planning. WOM from friends and family is usually a choicer source of information over other sources. The possibility of this phenomenon through the creation of a STN helps transfuse electronic word of mouth from one's personal connections thereby increasing the trust in the product or service.

Other factors that could be affecting the shift in trust could be the transparency and volume of reviews provided on the site. As more people flock to the site every day and thousands of new reviews are posted, it becomes easier to pick out useful information from the bad ones. As a STN, TripAdvisor creates the opportunity for users to also find out about fellow reviewers and their networks.

TripAdvisor also creates trust among the users, by having volunteers from destinations who serve as destination experts on TripAdvisor without any monetary

benefits. These are people who care significantly about their city, country or village and are willing to help answer questions from travelers. TripAdvisor makes sure to choose individuals who have regular and relevant contribution to the forums, are friendly and offer honest and good advice to travelers (TripAdvisor, 2014c).

H5: Perceived trustworthiness of a STN positively influences the behavioral intention to use information from it for travel planning. The null hypothesis is also rejected here, as the values returned for the standardized estimate is (β) = 0.22 at p = .006. While majority of the previous research failed to reject the null hypothesis, this paper finds that definitely a positive direct relationship exists between trust and intention. This again is perhaps due to the fact that people are increasingly trusting reviews on TripAdvisor and the number of users is increasing every day. Furthermore, a recent study by Amaro & Duarte (2015), presented similar conclusions where they found trust and intention to be positively related as well, with (β = 0.11, p < 0.001).

Skift.com, the largest industry intelligence and marketing platform in the tourism sector (Skift, 2014) mentioned that:

"Travel reviews are increasingly becoming a more significant and trustworthy factor in the decision-making process. For example, 77 percent of respondents confident they'll take a trip this year trust other travelers' reviews. Only 16 percent found them "not trustworthy." (Skift, 2014a)

They also mention that travelers are now relying more on 'others' social media updates for their trip planning and the most commonly used platform were Facebook at 27% (4% more than last year) and TripAdvisor at 18% (4% less than last year) (Skift, 2014a). These statistics clearly support the main theme of this thesis that STNs are in fact a reality today.

5.4 Other findings

Although this research is quantitative and the researcher did not have any intention on collecting any qualitative information. Respondents who completed the questionnaire posted on LinkedIn, voluntarily left some valuable comments. The author believes this information is valuable and discusses a few of the comments in this section. A table listing all the comments are presented in appendix E. To protect the privacy of these individuals they are addressed using their professional designations. Furthermore, the comments presented are completely unedited, therefore the author requests the reader to overlook the spelling or grammatical errors in the comments.

"Tripadvisor for me is one of the starting pages when planning a travel or vacations in combination with a lot of other sides - national tourist

organizations, hotel sites etc. As I am travel journalist when writting articles sometimes it is also interesting to chech reviews in order to get different viewpoints in addition to my own impressions and expirience. It certainly is one of the sites that influences both sides - customers and business" - Journalist at RTV Slovenija

This individual finds TripAdvisor useful for her travel plans and also uses it as a tool for her work as a travel journalist- this is in line with the findings in this thesis. She also shows trust in TripAdvisor however chooses to relate it to her own experiences in order to create a clear understanding-this again reflects the findings of trust on behavioral intention. She further believes that TripAdvisor influences both the supply and demand side.

"Hi everyone. A view from the other side. We have a Bed and Breakfast in Bundaberg Qld Australia. We have had people from all over the world come and stay as our guests. They have read our reviews on Trip Advisor and made their decision where to stay from those reviews. For us Trip Advisor has been our main source of business from overseas"- Accommodation at Hideaway Haven Bed and Breakfast

This individual represents the supply side. He confirms that TripAdvisor is indeed helping tourists with their travel plans. The tourists that visit his accommodation do so based on reviews posted about the place on TripAdvisor. He further informs that tourists who are geographically distant use TripAdvisor to learn more about his accommodation. These statements are in close connection with the findings relating to perceived ease of use having a positive effect of perceived usefulness and behavioral intention to use information.

"I personally check TripAdvisor before any trip. Also I try to post fair reviews of properties and restaurants. We strongly advise all of our travelers to check TA before booking their hotels. We believe a lot of travel is about expectations. By checking reviews before you go, you can get a realistic idea of the quality of the property - before you get stuck somewhere undesirable."-Managing Director, BarterFirst International

This individual confirms some of the literature that has been discussed in the literature review section about how travelers tend to form perceptions about their travel plans before actually embarking on one. TripAdvisor is useful during this pre-trip stage in travel planning.

One of the most valuable comments come from, Buenos Aires Local Private Tour Guide

"I join trip advisor like 8 years ago. I saw how it changed when they start to grow. I think that they are things that are more commercial now and unfair for the benefits of some people that pay more. In my case I cannot compite with people that pay google addwords with lot of money (I m an individual local tour guide trying to work hard and do my job) or with a comment from a Trip Advisor Expert who post about a company like a tango show or a group of people doing a cowboy show. They are listed like the best 20 activities to do and all of the local guides dissapeared. That was not like this 5 years ago. So the 1st page of attractions are valuable and the rest can never increase positions. Is not the same to give a service to 1 or 4 people (4 reviews as much) than a service for a big group of 100 people (means 100 reviews as much)"

Her opinion is extremely valuable to this research as she sheds some light on the supply side of TripAdvisor. She elaborates how small businesses tend to suffer the exposure factor. As more people tend to use TripAdvisor today, many do not take the time to completely explore the options and prefer to accept the recommendations available on the landing page of the site. This over time helps to popularize a particular product or service as more people end up writing reviews for it. However this hurts small to medium enterprises as they cannot compete with their limited resources as expressed in the statement.

Her comment also mentions a manipulative side of TripAdvisor where some destination experts will promote several products or services. By doing so future tourists usually flock to such places as they rank higher, while small local business suffer.

In summation of this chapter, the legitimacy of the structural equation model, in understanding how perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness and perceived trustworthiness have direct positive impact on behavioral intention to use information in travel planning is confirmed. All of the null hypotheses were rejected and credible evidence was found to support the outcomes. Previous literature, current technology and tourism trends also support the findings as presented in this section. Furthermore, the comments from the respondents on LinkedIn help bind together the theory and practice related to TripAdvisor. Even though the author tried to make sure the model, findings and the thesis is extensive, there is always some limitations and room for further improvement. The next section of this chapter discusses practical implications of the research, acknowledges limitations of this thesis and suggests recommendations for future research.

5.5 Contributions to theory and practice

This dissertation makes several contributions to theory. First, this thesis clearly defines what a STN is. The lack of a clear definition in past literary work created confusion about whether the studies were speaking about just user generated content, electronic word of mouth or perhaps incorporating both. It was also confusing to understand if the studies were at all focusing on structure of the communication, the medium, and the recipients. This paper helps to evidently establish a clear definition thus enabling future research in the area of STNs.

Secondly, this study for the first time takes into consideration both the technology acceptance model and incorporates it with the information adoption model. Majority of the previous research used only the technology acceptance model with only a few papers where information adoption is used. However the author disagrees with some of the previous researchers, in their idea of only using technology acceptance model in studying information usage. TripAdvisor is not a device, it is not a piece of technology. It is a site that uses technology to deliver information. TripAdvisor provides content created by travelers all over the globe to other travelers across the world. This is information; therefore it is imperative that the information adoption model is used in conjunction with the technology acceptance model.

Finally, this study finds proof that perceived trustworthiness has significant impact on behavioral intention to use information. Majority of the previous research found a negative relation along these two constructs. However the author strongly believes that the paradigm is different now than even a year or two before. The large number of users flocking to TripAdvisor and Facebook, along with credibility measures put in place by both the sites, has definitely raised the trust factor among users.

This thesis also proves that a structural equation model is useful in studying STNs and their impact on users. Future researchers can take this model as a base and further develop on it grounded on the recommendations provided in the next section of this chapter under limitations and future research.

Not only does the thesis contribute to theory but the findings also have practical use for tourism and technology practitioners. Tourism practitioners should always consider the adverse effects STNs may have on their businesses. They must always make sure that they are providing quality service to clients. The findings can help practitioners understand how STNs are motivating the travel planning process of the modern tourist and create products in a fashion that is not contradictory to the expectation. Furthermore, practitioners should always remember to build goodwill with their clients as negative electronic word of mouth can have significant influence on the profitability of the business. Furthermore technology companies that are working in the area of tourism will find the dissertation useful in several ways. First, they should always remember to create a product or service that is easy to use. If a product is difficult to use or the learning curve is difficult to find relevant information, users will deem the product not useful. Secondly, the product or service created should have significant usefulness to the client or user. Usefulness is the most significant factor when it comes to behavioral intention to using a service. Practitioners should promote and educate their clients about the usefulness of tourism related services. The more useful a product will be to an individual, the more likelihood there is of it being used.

Finally, the idea of social is something of great importance. No matter how useful or easy a service may appear, without trust from the customers the lifespan of such a service or product will be short lived. Trust can be built, through the use of positive reinforcement from social networks, be it Facebook, Twitter or any other service. However, it can only be built when current product or service users are satisfied and are willing to speak positively about it. Therefore, current and future technology companies should consider the integration of reviews and social network directly on the site. This will help users relate better to the product and find relevant information quickly. Many sites are already practicing this idea, however they are lacking on the idea of building trust. This paper helps establish the fact that it is of significant importance while creating a product in the area of tourism technology.

5.6 Limitations and recommendations for future research

With the limited amount of research till date on the affects, impacts, contributions of technology on tourism, it is important that future researchers take stride in this direction. This dissertation tried to shed some light on the impact of social travel networks in travel planning today through the fusion of TAM and IAM. However, there are several limitations that the author would like to acknowledge and recommend future research in this area.

This research takes an empirical approach to understanding the effect of STNs in travel planning and uses a web based questionnaire. One major limitation in this approach is the limited opinion gathered though the use of a questionnaire. Respondents perhaps have a very different perspective on certain items but are limited in their choices. Also a 7 point Likert scale limits respondents to express their true feeling. Allport and Kerler (2003, p.356) warn that, "Measurement is perhaps the most difficult aspect of behavioral research." A continuous line or track bar could have been used as a solution. However, the survey platform Obsurvey did not offer this usability as it has still to gain widespread acceptance (Treiblmaier, Pinterits & Foh, 2004).

Furthermore, the survey was available online for only 28 days and the low number of 150 STN users can be considered as a limitation. The limitation on the number of days is because the first 30 days of the survey hosting was free and following which, the researcher would have to pay a significant amount in service subscription fees. It may be assumed that larger participation could have been achieved if the survey was online for a longer period of time.

Another limitation in this research was the language of the survey. Since the survey was only available in English, it limited the survey respondents to comprehend and follow instructions in English. For future research similar to this, the survey can be translated to several languages allowing for a greater variety of participants.

The survey design can be considered as a limitation of this thesis. The survey only asked questions about TripAdvisor as a STN, other examples of STN such as Lonely Planet or Holiday Check could be included to obtain a better dataset about the impact of STNs. Furthermore, the survey did not ask the respondents about the country of origin or country where the respondents are residing during the survey. This limitation could be avoided through the purchase of a subscription from Obsurvey as they would then provide the geographic location of all the respondents based on their internet protocol addresses. All future survey related to STNs should address this issue and collect the geographic information about the respondents.

In addition, the study is quantitative, and incorporates structural equation modeling techniques to test the validity of the hypothesis. However, in studies where it involves individuals, it perhaps is beneficial to have a research that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methodology. It is recommended that future research in such areas include individuals' opinions. Such research would help pin point benefits, problems and critical anomalies in individual perception that cannot be reproduced through equations.

Furthermore, in the structural equation model, the author did not consider any mediators. However during the analysis, it was apparent that mediators perhaps would produce a different set of results and outcomes. Men perhaps find TripAdvisor less useful than women, older users perhaps do not trust reviews as much as young users. Therefore it is recommended that future research is conducted considering mediators such as age, income, education, gender and location.

Moreover, this thesis only examined perceived usefulness, perceives ease of use and perceived trustworthiness. Conversely taking other constructs such as mood and previous experience or engagement with the product, and reason for use (business or leisure), into consideration would better explain the complex relationship. Furthermore, this study only looked at TripAdvisor as a STN, however there are several new and exclusive and innovative sites who also fit the definition of a STN as provided in this thesis. Future studies should be conducted incorporating such sites to produce a holistic picture of the phenomenon. In fact perceived trustworthiness appears to be the least discussed item in current literature predicting behavioral intention. Future researchers should consider studying perceived trustworthiness in depth to clearly document its effects on behavioral intention.

A final recommendation to future researchers trying to study STNs will be to conduct the research quickly; this may not sound logical as research is time consuming. However, considering the dynamics of technology, what is relevant today may become outdated in a year or two. Therefore it is important to consider the rapid pace of technology and produce relevant research that will aid the tourism industry.

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this dissertation was to understand the impact of social travel networks on travel planning, by studying the example of TripAdvisor as a STN. To achieve this TAM by Davis (1989) and IAM by Sussman and Siegal (2003) was used as the theoretical foundation.

A research questionnaire was created and data collected was used to analyze the proposed SEM in the dissertation. The model was used to test the hypotheses and credible evidence was found regarding the effect of perceived trustworthiness and perceived ease of use on perceived usefulness and behavioral intention to use information. Furthermore, it was also proved that there was a positive significance of perceived ease of use on behavioral intention to use information. In addition the effect of trustworthiness on behavioral intention to use information was particularly interesting. Majority of the previous research did not find these factors to be positively related, although recent works and this dissertation found support in this regard. Therefore leading to strong conclusions that travelers today are putting more of their trust in STNs.

Through the use of STNs, travelers are able to easily connect, collect and share valuable information for and about their travels. This information significantly aids the travel planning process. Travelers today can easily find recommendations from their trusted family, friends and acquaintances on their STNs, saving them time, money and unwanted stress.

There is indeed a paradigm shift in the travel planning process today where, both the supply and the demand side are working together to create a massive travel network that is based on social connections. Thereby creating powerful and useful STNs.

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APPENDIXES

LIST OF APPENDIXES

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Appendix A: LIST OF ACRONYMS

AMOS	Analysis of Moment Structures
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
App	Application
ASV	Average Shared Variance
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
BITUI	Behavioral Intention to Use Information
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
CR	Critical Ratio
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
e-WOM	Electronic Word of Mouth
GFI	Goodness of Fit Index
IAM	Information Adoption Model
ICT	Information Communication Technologies
MSV	Maximum Shared Variance
NFI	Normed Fit Index
PEOU	Perceived Ease of Use
PT	Perceived Trustworthiness
PU	Perceived Usefulness
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
S.E	Standard Error
SEM	Structural Equation Model
SNS	Social Networking Site
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
STN	Social Travel Network
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
TLI	Tucker-Lewis Coefficient
UGC	User Generated Content
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
WOM	Word of Mouth
WWW	World Wide Web

		% who use social networking sites			
All internet users $18 + (n = 5,112)$ 73%					
а	Men (n=2,368)	69			
b	Women $(n = 2,744)$	78			
Ra	Race/ethnicity				
a	White, Non-Hispanic (n=3,617)	72			
b	Black, Non-Hispanic	73			
c	Hispanic	79			
Age					
a	18-29 (n=929)	90			
b	30-49 (n=1,507)	78			
c	50-64 (n=1,585)	65			
d	65+(n=1,000)	46			
Education attainment					
a	No high school diploma ($n = 243$)	74			
b	High school graduate (n=1238)	69			
c	Some college (n=1461)	75			
d	College+ $(n=2144)$	75			
Household income					
а	Less than \$30,000/yr (n=1,212)	77			
b	\$30,000-\$49,999 (n=886)	73			
c	\$50,000-\$74,999 (n=746)	73			
d	\$75,000+ (n=1,600)	75			
Urbanity					
a	Urban (n=1,605)	76			
b	Suburban (n=2585)	72			
c	Rural (n=922)	70			

Appendix B: User profile for social networking sites

Source: Pew Research Internet Project (2013).

Appendix C: Top 30 travel networks during the month of August 2014

Name of the travel network	Alexa traffic	Brief Description
	rank	
Tripadvisor.com	2	Information on hotels, resorts and packages with reviews from travelers with star ratings.
Vrbo.com	19	Top Vacation Rental site with over 75,000 listings and largest following of any vacation rental site.
Lonelyplanet.com	21	Offers travel advice, detailed maps, travel news, popular message boards and health information. Also lists
Wikitravel.org	26	Founded in 2003. A project to create a free, complete, up-to-date and reliable world-wide travel guide. Destination guides and other articles written and edited by Wiki travelers from around the globe. Open editing by any reader.
Hostelworld.com	34	Online bookings at over 17,000 hostels worldwide with over 1 million customer reviews
Couchsurfing.com	39	Offers profile listing, discussion groups and a place to arrange free accommodations around the world.
Fodors.com	51	In-depth restaurant and hotel reviews in cities around the world, and smart travel tips to make vacation planning easier.
Virtualtourist.com	55	Interactive site aimed at sharing travel knowledge. Includes chat, forums, travelogues, photos and maps.
Frommers.com	83	Information on destinations around the globe. Includes activities, feature articles, guidebooks and message boards.
Blablacar.com	108	Connects people who want to carpool to the same destination in Europe. Allows users to request for and offer seats.
Wikivoyage.org	109	A free, non-commercial, open source travel guide to which anyone can contribute (wiki principle)
Travelpod.com	112	A service which lets you share your travels online. Also includes resources, chat and links.
Viamichelin.com	115	An online route planning service for Western Europe that provides the driver with interactive maps, driving directions and information on services featured near a user's travel route or address.
Bedandbreakfast.com	123	Listings for thousands of bed and breakfasts, inns and homestays worldwide
Gadventures.com	129	Offers small group, grass roots, and low impact tours worldwide. Includes company profile and philosophy, testimonials, frequently asked questions, and contact details.
Travelblog.org	134	Hosting travel blogs, photos and videos from around the world, home to an enthusiastic community of travel bloggers
Points.com	140	Gives members the opportunity to exchange points, miles or other currencies between loyalty programs.

(table continues)

(continued)

Intervalworld.com	145	Interval provides its members - vacation owners from around the world - with a variety of exchange services and other exciting benefits to enhance their vacation experiences.
Airlinequality.com	158	World airline surveys, quality rankings, reviews and allied air transport information.
Everything- everywhere.com	163	The travel blog of Gary Arndt's journey to travel around the world.
Travellerspoint.com		Worldwide community offering free travel tools and information to help travelers before, during and after their trip. Message boards, photos and tips and advice.
Independenttraveler.com	162	Portal including advice on trip planning and other topics, travelogues, online forum, current travel bargains, and other resources.
Bootsnall.com	164	Information about places around the globe. Discussion boards, travel guides and travelers toolkit.
Theplanetd.com	167	A guide to exploring and traveling the world written by Canada's Adventure Couple.
Muza-chan.net	170	Photos from Japan, Japan travel and places, Japanese culture, history and customs and traditions, Japanese music, facts and trivia about Japan
Uncensoredmarket.com	173	The award winning around-the-world travel blog chronicling the journey of professional storytelling team, Daniel Noll and Audrey Scott.
Helpx.net	188	Volunteer work in exchange for free accommodation and food (bed and board) in Australia, New Zealand and Europe on farms, backpacker hostels, lodges and other properties
Gobackpacking.com	201	Dedicated to creating a community of backpackers and budget travelers through the sharing of advice and experience. Features popular 'Round the World travel blog
Thevacationgals.com	200	Advice on family travel, girlfriend getaways and romantic escapes.
Spottedbylocals.com	215	Spotted by Locals is a series of blogs, PDF city guides and iPhone apps with up-to-date tips by handpicked local writers in 41 cities in Europe.
		Source: Alexa (2014a).

4
Appendix D: Master thesis questionnaire

Page 1: Introduction (respondents do not see this information in italics)

Hello,

You are invited to participate in this survey which aims to better understand the importance of Social Travel Networks (STNs), such as TripAdvisor, in the travel planning process. We welcome your honest feedback. The survey will take less than 10 minutes to complete. Your survey response will be strictly confidential and anonymous. All data collected from this research will be reported only in the aggregate. If you have any questions at any time about the survey or the procedures, you may contact the author at syed.bashar@outlook.com. Thank you for your valued time and support. Please start the survey by clicking on the button below.

Declaration: I Syed Bashar declare that I did not receive any financial support for this research from any parties or companies named in this survey. This survey is for academic use only and will be used as a part of my master thesis.

Sincerely,

Syed Bashar

Supervisor Dr. Tanja Mihalic

Page 2: Screening questions (respondents do not see this information in italics)

- Have you used Facebook or Twitter within the past 6 months? O Yes
 O No
- Have you used TripAdvisor (TA) to search for travel related information (accommodation, destination, transportation, etc.) within the last 12 months? O Yes O No

*Page 3: For those that responded with, 'Yes' to question 2 (*respondents do not see this information in italics*)*

The following statements describe your views about the content posted by travelers on TripAdvisor. Please indicate extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the statements (Mark one of the seven spaces in each row). Please note that the statement, "Using the content of TripAdvisor for travel planning", includes looking up the travelers comments, reviews, photographs and other content generated by any of the participants on TripAdvisor.

If you do not have an opinion please select, 'Neutral'.

	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
TripAdvisor helps me improve my travel plans	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TripAdvisor helps me to plan my trips more efficiently	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TripAdvisor makes my travel planning easier	0	0	0	0	0	0	Ο
TripAdvisor makes it easier for me to reach travel related decisions	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Overall, I find TripAdvisor useful for travel planning	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
It is easy to learn how to use TripAdvisor	0	0	0	0	0	Ο	0
It is easy to use TripAdvisor to find relevant information needed for travel planning	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
It is easy for me to access TripAdvisor(signup, signin, login, settings)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TripAdvisor website is easy to use to plan my trips	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Overall, I find TripAdvisor easy to use	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
I hesitate to visit TripAdvisor website for travel information	0	Ο	0	0	0	0	0
I wish to use travel advice from TripAdvisor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
I expect to use the content of TripAdvisor to plan my future trips	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
I make changes to all or parts of my existing travel plans after using the content of TripAdvisor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
I intend to use the content of TripAdvisor for my travel planning process	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Page 4: Continuation from page 3 (respondents do not see this information in italics)

The following questions are about your trust in TripAdvisor. How do you feel about the travelers who post content on TripAdvisor? Please mark one of the seven spaces in each row.

	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
They are Dependable	0	Ο	0	0	0	0	0
They are Honest	0	Ο	0	0	0	0	0
They are Reliable	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
They are Sincere	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
They are Trustworthy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Page 5: This page is a continuation from page 4 or a logical leap from page 2 when a respondent selects, 'No' to both the screening questions (respondents do not see this information in italics)

Just about done. Please tell us a little about yourself by marking the appropriate box. Your gender?

O Male Your age? O Less than 18 O 18-30 O 31-40 O 41-50 O 51-60 O 60+ The highest level of formal education you have completed? O High school/Secondary education O Diploma/Associate's Degree (2 Years) O Bachelor's Degree O Graduate/Post Graduate Degree O Other, please specify

O Female

How often do you use the internet?

O Maximum 10 times a month or less

O At least 5 times a week

O About once a day

O Several times a day

O Constantly connected (mobile internet)

Are you likely to plan a trip over the next 12 months?

O Yes O Maybe O No

Thank you for participating in the survey. Please feel free to contact us anytime at syed.bashar@outlook.com. Thank you again and have a great day!

Appendix E: Comments about TripAdvisor from survey respondents on LinkedIn.

Please note: The names of the respondents have been removed to ensure their privacy. The titles of the participants and comments are as they were provided and were not edited in any form. The author does not take responsibility for any spelling or grammatical errors. The author did not request any of the respondents to provide any comments, neither did the questionnaire. However several respondents left a comment after completing the survey.

The following comments are from World Tourism Network group on LinkedIn

Title	Location	Comment
Marketing Digital GREAT TEAM	Mexico City Area, Mexico	Hi Syed. I just answered the survey. I will like very much to know the results and will appreciate you send them to me if this is possible. Thanks.
		Maybe use TripAdvisor to know the highlights but afterwards, I think the best thing to do is relay on a local high quality printed guide. For example, if you come to Mexico City #CDMX don't miss Travel Mania Mexico - Tourist & Cultural Guide
PARTNER at R C HOSPITALITY & R C TRAVELS	Alwar, Rajasthan, India	Tripadvisor is a great travel planning tool, specially when it comes to Hotel selection. But one must beware of a large number of fake reviews and take the veracity of the claims made intelligently.
Owner, CEO at Uno Tours & Travels, Cochin, Kerala, India	Cochin Area, India	Trip advisor reviews can also be fake / vindictive. Better take it with a generous pinch of salt
Trekking and Tour operator in Nepal at Passages Nepal Pvt. Ltd.	Nepal	It is very useful, thanks for saying.
experienced filmmaker	Zürich Area, Switzerland	For an initial survey TripAdvisor is a good tool, but it does not spare you further research into the site or hotel to prevent disappointment

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Chairperson at Bridport Innovations	Launceston, Australia	I refer to Tripadvisor when planning overseas travel. I'm currently reseaching a trip to Turkey, Greece, Albania and Italy for April/May next year. If anyone here has any on the ground information about Albania and Turkey I would be most greatful.
Director at AyaThai Group Co., Ltd	Thailand	It is useful to find patterns in reviews while ignoring the best and worst reviews. I usually start by clicking "Average" and look for patterns in that rating category. Typically the most useful reviews are the most boring as they tend to fit and confirm a pattern found for that property. For example, If you see a pattern about service issues extending over a year, in different languages, then there is evidently a problem that needs to be considered.
Accommodation at Hideaway Haven Bed and Breakfast	Bundaberg, Australia	Hi everyone. A view from the other side.
		We have a Bed and Breakfast in Bundaberg Qld Australia.
		We have had people from all over the world come and stay as our guests. They have read our reviews on Trip Advisor and made their decision where to stay from those reviews. For us Trip Advisor has been our main source of business from overseas
journalist at RTV Slovenija	Slovenia	Tripadvisor for me is one of the starting pages when planning a travel or vacations in combination with a lot of other sides - national tourist organizations, hotel sites etc. As I am travel journalist when writting articles sometimes it is also interesting to chech reviews in order to get different viewpoints in addition to my own impressions and expirience. It certainly is one of the sites that influences both sides - customers and bussiness.
Business Owner / Managing Director	Melbourne, Australia	Good article and some nice comments. Trip advisor should not be used exclusively though. The fastest growing, global travel information portal is My Destination. They have people on the ground, in every destination they feature and are able to provide latest information and recommendations based on the needs/aspirations of that traveller. We're all different and seek different things and usually have different perspectives or expectations. They have free ipad and iphone travel Apps with an Android due for launch later this month. Take a look and happy to provide more information.

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Swansea Motor Inn	Tasmania, Australia	I use trip advisor when booking property's but tend to ignore any that appear whingy or overly great. I take notice of anything that seems to come up consistantly such as great service, Cleanliness or the reverse and tend to take note of the basics. It can be very frustrating being a motel owner when people who have booked a budget room that states the room is older ans smaller than more expensive rooms and then have the guest complain that the rooms are older and smaller. But all in all trip advisor is a great tool
Manager at WOODBOURNE RESORT	South Africa	I agree with the general concensus that indicates one cannot believe 100% of any review on any site. Consistent bad or good reviews give a hint though. A one-off bad review can simply mean a guest arrived in a bad mood from an arduous journey. Thank you to Cliff Cornell for the info as one has to use more than one avenue to do ones research!
Independent Leisure, Travel & Tourism Professional	Bengaluru Area, India	Any one who thinks that most of the reviews on Trip Advisor are fake is probably an operator who has been on the receiving end of bad feedback - and does not know how to cope with it. I am a regular user of TripAdvisor for my own travel planning as well as for others who ask to me to help plan their trip. Never have I been disappointed or misled by Trip Advisor reviews Some guidelines for tis use: sad only reviews that are up to six months old; consider an option only if it has at least 10 reviews; throw out the outliers as Kathy Schroeder; look at the spread of the ratings; and finally, use more than one source - number of hotel booking sites also have reasonably comprehensive reviews.
Buenos Aires Local Private Tour Guide	Argentina	I join trip advisor like 8 years ago. I saw how it changed when they start to grow. I think that they are things that are more commercial now and unfair for the benefits of some people that pay more. In my case I cannot compite with people that pay google addwords with lot of money (I m an individual local tour guide trying to work hard and do my job) or with a comment from a Trip Advisor Expert who post about a company like a tango show or a group of people doing a cowboy show. They are listed like the best 20 activities to do and all of the local guides dissapeared. That was not like this 5 years ago. So the 1st page of attractions are valuable and the rest can never increase positions. Is not the same to give a service to 1 or 4 people (4 reviews as much)
Owner of Traveljunkies - Worldwide Adventure Travel & Activities Directory & Search Engine. Like Google Only Smaller.	Portsmouth, United Kingdom	TipAdvisor is a good start point but we've come across detrimental comments from competition which is why we always check out entries before we include them in traveljunkies But our main focus is on small travel related businesses which may be of interest to some here. And it's free You can contact me

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Managing Director, BarterFirst International	Orlando, Florida Area, USA	I personally check TripAdvisor before any trip. Also I try to post fair reviews of properties and restaurants. We strongly advise all of our travelers to check TA before booking their hotels. We believe a lot of travel is about expectations. By checking reviews before you go, you can get a realistic idea of the quality of the property - before you get stuck somewhere undesirable.
Booking Coordinator presso Terre di mare Associazione culturale	Palermo Area, Italy	I use Tripadvisor when I plan my journeys
Research Officer at Sanskarkendra- Museums & City Centre, Heritage Cell, Ahmedabad Muincipal Corpoation	Ahmedabad, India	pleple usualy want to travel for relaxation, knowledge, entertain and all so without trip advisor people can not go to a useful/ purposeful placethey cant feel comfort.
Owner at Travelbug - Tourism and Social Media Marketing	George Area, South Africa	Brilliant, don't leave home without it!!Grin.
Managing Director	Bangladesh	Exactly Very important for a traveler.

The following comments are from International Tourism Studies Association (ITSA) group on LinkedIn

Title	Location	Comment
Ph.D. Research Student at Universidade de Coimbra	Porto Area, Portugal	Done! Good luck!
Professional Tourism & Hospitality Expert	Iran	Good Luck!
Incoming tourism	Israel	I love also www.taskinsider.com it's a new startup but I just used it and it was terrific :) good luck with your survey, i just completed it :)))