

VIRTUAL TRAVEL COMMUNITIES:
WHAT ARE ONLINE TRAVELLERS LOOKING FOR?

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ABSTRACT

The internet has changed the ways travellers acquire information during the trip planning process. The rise of Web 2.0 applications such as virtual communities and social networking has negated the information asymmetries previous held by the tourism industry, giving consumers access to travel knowledge and information from official and unofficial sources without boundaries. Virtual travel communities are places where travellers search for and share travel experiences and knowledge. Being a form of electronic word-of-mouth communication, these members within these communities have been found to exert significant influence over the travel decisions and plans of users who were using the websites as a source of information. This study explored the content of one such community, the Lonely Planet Thorn Tree forums, which is also one of the oldest virtual communities on the internet. A mixed methods analysis approached was used to identify the common questions and destinations asked about on the forum in the context of travel within Malaysia. A comparison with Tourism Malaysia, the National Tourism Organisation of Malaysia, was conducted to identify gaps between the two types of websites. The findings show that travellers use VTCs to seek knowledge about their travel itineraries, transportation and accommodation at their destination. The comparative analysis found that the official web portal of Tourism Malaysia was unable to answer the common questions on the VTC as the information provided were too general and directed towards mainstream consumers. The findings of this study also has implications for tourism intermediaries and tourism suppliers which have been slow in adapting and adopting online communities and Web 2.0 as part of their marketing strategy.

ABSTRAK

Penggunaan internet telah mengubah cara pelancong memperolehi maklumat semasa proses perancangan perjalanan. Penggunaan aplikasi Jaringan 2.0 seperti komuniti-komuniti maya dan rangkaian sosial telah mengurangkan asimetri maklumat yang sebelum ini dikuasai oleh pihak industri pelancongan. Ini telah memberi pengguna-pengguna akses kepada maklumat dari sumber-sumber rasmi dan tidak rasmi tanpa sempadan. Komuniti pelancongan maya merupakan tempat di mana pelancong boleh mencari dan berkongsi pengalaman serta pengetahuan. Sebagai sejenis bentuk komunikasi elektronik melalui buah mulut, ahli-ahli komuniti ini telah didapati untuk memiliki pengaruh yang penting ke atas keputusan dan rancangan pelancongan pengguna-pengguna yang menggunakan laman web tersebut sebagai sumber maklumat. Kajian ini menerokai kandungan satu komuniti sedemikian, iaitu forum Lonely Planet Thorn Tree yang juga merupakan salah satu komuniti maya yang tertua atas internet. Analisis kaedah bercampur digunakan untuk mengenal pasti soalan-soalan lazim dan destinasi pelancongan yang sering ditanya. Perbandingan dengan laman web Tourism Malaysia mendapati bahawa para pelancong menggunakan komuniti maya untuk mendapat pengetahuan berkenaan dengan jadual perjalanan, pengangkutan dan penginapan di destinasi mereka. Analisis perbandingan mendapati bahawa laman web rasmi Tourism Malaysia tidak dapat menjawab soalan-soalan lazim yang ditanya pada komuniti maya atas sebab maklumat di atas laman web rasmi terlalu umum dan diarahkan terhadap pengguna-pengguna aliran utama. Penemuan kajian ini juga mempunyai implikasi terhadap perantara-perantara serta pembekal-pembekal pelancongan yang lambat dalam menyesuaikan strategi pemasaran mereka dengan komuniti maya dan Jaringan 2.0 secara keseluruhannya.