

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Online Social Networks (OSNs) have gained significant popularity on the Internet landscape in recent years. Millions of users have been interested in them since the introduction of Social Network Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter that allow users to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others.

OSN also referred to as “Travel 2.0” in tourism has introduced a wide range of new advanced technology applications including media, content syndication, tagging, customer ratings, podcasting, and so forth. In other words, these OSN applications allow travelers to search, update, organize, comment and share travel information with friends and family in a collaborative way. On the other hand, a number of tourism businesses and organizations have started to use OSNs within the online advertising and promotion activities in order to take advantage of this “electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)” where they can get feedback from tourists and increase their loyalty.

OSN is a new channel for business and organization to attract new customers and promote their products. If the tourism uses SNSs it will be to easier to reach those travelers and have a beneficial effect on destination. Additionally, tourism organization marketers or business owners have to understand the antecedents of the travelers ‘use and adoption of OSNs in travel. Due to these, collaborative behaviors on SNSs can influence travelers’ decision making involving all the elements of the trip (destination, hotel, accommodation, activities, restaurants, etc.).

This study addresses the intention to use OSNs with regard to traveling from an overall perspective of college students and young people. Because young people

make-up a large percentage of OSNs users, especially for college students, their using OSNs to share photos or videos, podcast, do customer ratings, connect with friends as well as receive product information is becoming generalized.

Background of the Study

1. OSNs and a Revolution

OSN is one of the main uses of the Internet, connecting people together through communication tools and various means of publishing personal information online. It has dramatically changed the way people work, play, learn, share, and receive news and information. Look back at 2009 as the year when OSNs became legitimate. There has been an explosive growth in the Internet landscape. YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and many other SNSs now command more eyeballs than television ever did. According to the PEW Internet and American Life project (2011), over 52% of the world's population is under 30 year old and 96% of them have joined a SNS. Social networking has become the number one activity on the Web. And 85% of the adults who use social media report that people are usually kind on the sites. At the same time, 49% have witnessed mean and offensive behavior and they usually respond by ignoring it. Facebook added 200 million users in under a year. What makes OSNs so attractive? Firstly, it is about online social relationship; all these SNSs services that allow users to communicate with each other through postings, messaging, and in some cases instant chats. Secondly, virtual marketing; many companies are using OSNs to promote their products or services in a free or a very low cost way. They use it to retain customers' relationships, informed about their products or services and to build trust and brand loyalty.

OSN is a fantastic platform where millions of people meet each other and share and discuss their opinions with friends. It also is a promotional tool which can bring business long-term benefits.

2. OSNs Usage in Thailand

OSNs usage in Thailand is also growing very quickly. Statistics from Asian Correspondent (2011) illustrated that Thailand has now become Facebook's third highest growing market in the world (See Figure 1), the percentage of growth is 7.1% per month. Otherwise, Thailand's Facebook membership numbers have risen to more than 5.7 million making the country's the 21st largest on the social network. In addition, mobile devices are the preferred tools of OSN users over PC or Mac. In Thailand more than 52% of OSNs users access SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter weekly via mobile phones and more than 65% OSNs users use mobile phones to get news alerts and notifications, receive and reply to messages, upload photos, or update personal status and profiles on popular SNSs.

Facebook Top Gainers: May to June 2011

Country	May 2011 <i>Millions</i>	June 2011 <i>Millions</i>	1-Month Growth
ALL	675.4	687.1	1.7%
Mexico	23.7	25.6	7.6%
Brazil	17.1	19.0	10.0%
India	24.9	26.6	6.7%
Indonesia	36.4	37.9	4.0%
Philippines	23.2	24.5	5.4%
Argentina	14.2	15.1	6.1%
Colombia	13.4	14.3	6.4%
Thailand	9.1	9.8	7.1%
Turkey	28.2	28.9	2.4%
France	21.9	22.5	2.5%

<http://gold.insidenetwork.com/facebook>

Figure 1 Facebook Top Gainers, June 2011

Source: Asia markets key to Facebook growth as US, Canada, UK post losses, 2011

3. The Role of OSNs in Traveling

Nowadays OSN is playing an important role in the travel and tourism industry. Travelers utilize OSN functions (e.g. search, social graph) enabling them to plan trips, get travel reviews and ask questions to online friends. Also, it is one of the most powerful forces driving travel planning today. OSN use among travelers is thus growing very fast and a lot of travel suppliers have used OSNs to connect with their customers. It has been recognized as an important information source for consumers and is more and more influencing the trip planning of travelers nowadays (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). As of this writing, travelers are no longer just retrieving information from search engines but using OSNs as a powerful tool, in order to get suggestions of places to visit, restaurants, hotels and other travel information from friends or experienced travelers to avoid any uncertainty of travel.

Over the past few years, there have been a bunch of travel social networks emerging on the Internet that allow travelers to plan a vacation, learn about good deals, and swap travel tips and experiences online. The niche travel SNSs, such as WikiTravel, TripAdvisor, VirtualTourist, TravBuddy are more focused on the younger, aspirational traveling classes, and most of them have performed the functions of travel planners, booking and implemented OSNs (e.g. Facebook or Twitter) connection which can display the OSN users who has visited or lived in that city, and let travelers aggregate all available information and assist their travel planning. According to comScore MobiLens data, the number of US mobile phone users performing social networking grew dramatically between April 2009 and April 2010. Social networking led all mobile application categories with 240% growth, as the number of users increased from 4.3 million to 14.5 million. All these social networking applications on mobile phone are transforming the way traveling is researched, discussed, and purchased. Thus, travelers can use these social network applications on a Web-enabled mobile phone to connect with friends, share travel photos, videos, location or travel experiences, and to search related travel information or to plan a trip in real time.

In fact, online reviews or comments are heavily used by travelers and have been found to have a great impact on travel decisions. It is like a reference group with the electronic word of mouth (eWOM) that impacts travelers' action. eWOM in SNSs occurs when users share or search for informal product-related information. Through extensively social interactions on SNSs, it may provide an easy way for travelers to obtain useful travel information and building social relationships with other travelers. According to a research on Cymfony, 30% of frequent OSN users trust their peers' opinions when making a purchase decision, and 40% of OSN users said they use SNSs to know more about the products or brands they like. eWOM influences travelers' decision making by strongly affecting travel products or service judgments. In this respect, good eWOM on SNSs will create stronger positive expectations of travelers, since messages from eWOM are seen as more trustworthy than marketer information. In travel and tourism, eWOM can be either positive or negative for all those travel suppliers, but it will always be positive for travelers.

4. Trends in College Student Use of OSNs

OSNs have become a large part of college students lives today. Some interesting data from EDUCAUSE via eMarketer (www.emarketer.com) showed that SNSs (e.g. Facebook, Myspace) are most frequently visited website by college students and the percentage of US college students who said they never use OSNs has fallen from 25% in 2006 to 11% in 2008. College student daily use of OSNs has increased from 72% in 2008 to 80% in 2009 and increased to 85% in 2010. This number continued to grow during 2010 and 2011. The report also indicated that 57.5% of students aged 18 and 19 use the SNS at least 6 hours per week, compared with 38% of students' aged 20 to 24. The main reason that college student uses OSNs is to stay connected. They use SNSs to find out more about people when they may or may not have met, and as a way to invite people to events. Additionally, nearly two-thirds use sites to share photos, videos and music. Similarly, staying in touch with friends, learning more about other people or products, and sharing content are some of the main reasons.

With a large number of students using SNSs, it is not surprising that school and business are looking into how to utilize the advantages of SNS for pedagogical and disseminating product information purposes. However, college students use SNS informally as a way to share, obtain information and knowledge with their friends and classmates, which might have a potential impact on the way they organize vacation trip and share travel information.

5. Youth and Student Travel

The youth and student travel market is a major growth segment of international tourism. As a significant sub-group of the larger youth travel market, the student college market represents a multibillion-dollar business (Chadee and Cutler, 1996). Young adult and college-aged travelers have received more and more attention in the majority of existing market studies due to their love for spending on discretionary items. They purchase way beyond their years. Kids' basic needs are met by their parents (to an extent) so these youth and student travelers have enough money to spend on traveling. However, Seeking (1998) mentioned that young travelers tend to be price sensitive, they generate a higher number of transactions and as a result, their spending per visit is often equivalent to other type of travelers' spending. In fact, their already high spending is enhanced by long-stay visits. It can also benefit local economies because they tend to purchase locally produced goods (D'Anjou, 2004), thus resulting in relatively low leakage of sales revenue. Since young travelers are among the first explorers of new places, they can play an important role in the development of a destination's tourism industry. Furthermore, educated travelers, such as college students usually have a great amount of disposable time during the school holiday, and tend to mix their travel experiences with adventure, study, work and relaxation. On the other hand, they can be very environmentally and socially conscious, and have very high repeat-traffic potential.

In order to expand the youth and student tourism market share, tourism marketers should pay close attention to their behaviors and perceptions. In particular, understanding intention to use OSN in travel can help tourism marketers enhance knowledge of youth and student travel patterns and overall, more effectively target this lucrative travel market.

Statement of the Problem

Technological innovation influences the distribution and accessibility of travel information. While OSNs have become increasingly significant in tourism domain, more and more tourists use it to plan vacation trip and update travel information or experience, which has an impact at the pre-travel stage for other tourists. Many tourism businesses are using these OSNs for a marketing purpose; enhancing loyalty and facilitating the interaction with travelers. Among these OSNs users, young people appear to be a significant tourism market, since intensity in using OSNs before, during and after travel which covers searching information, organizing trip, studying other tourists experience, asking question from experienced travelers, sharing travel information and assessing products or services. These activities are not only concerned with tangible aspects such as equipment, monetary cost, access effort and privacy consideration, but it pertains more importantly to the intangible aspects (trust, enjoyment and expected relationship). Almost all of young people already possess the skill and equipment (e.g. computers, mobile phones) to access OSNs. All they care for is the travel information reliability, fun to use OSNs in vacation trip planning and travel experience sharing, as well as building relationships with other tourists.

With the fast-growing OSNs market, tourism marketers and destination policy makers should pay more attention to young people using OSNs with regard to traveling among young people.

Rationale of the Research

This study may contribute to both individuals and organizations involved in OSNs research. Firstly, from this study, tourism marketers may become more aware and knowledgeable about how to utilize OSNs as a marketing channel. It may also inspire tourism marketers to understand tourist's activities on SNSs, as well as improve their online travel services in the future. Secondly, travelers may get a better understanding of how OSNs can contribute to travel or reduced the risk of traveling. Thirdly, this study may be valuable for OSN service providers, helping them, for example, to understand how OSNs impact travelers' communication and inspire approaches to advanced information technology.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the respondents' perception of the use of OSNs with regard to travel decision making.
2. To investigate the differences between the respondents' characteristics and the perception of the use of OSNs with regard to travel decision making.
3. To identify the relationship between the respondents' perception of using OSNs and their intention to use them with regard to their travel decision making.

Research Questions

1. How do respondents' perceive the use of OSNs with regard to travel decision making?
2. What are the significant differences between the respondents' characteristics and their perception of the use of OSNs with regard to travel decision making?
3. What are the significant relationships between the respondents' perception using OSNs and their intention to use them with regard to travel decision making?

Research Hypothesis

1. Ho: There is no significant difference between the respondents' nationality and their perception of the use of OSNs with regard to traveling travel decision making

Ha: There is significant difference between the respondents' nationality and their perception of the use of OSNs with regard to traveling travel decision

2. Ho: There is no significant difference between the respondents' gender and their perception of the use of OSNs with regard to traveling travel decision making

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3. Ho: There is no significant difference between the respondents' disposable money and their perception of the use of OSNs with regard to traveling travel decision making.

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4. Ho: There is no significant relationship between the respondents' perception using OSNs and their intention to use them with regard to traveling travel decision making.

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Scope of the Research

This study aims to investigate the college students' the perception of the use of OSNs with regard to travel decision making. The students were selected from universities. In addition, this study focuses on the characteristics of OSNs users among college students and their intention to use OSNs with regard to traveling. Since students travel more independently, most of them rely on internet for searching travel information and sharing their travel experiences, which usually encompasses choices of destination, accommodation, transportation, length of stay, expense, etc. Consequently, this is important for tourism and IT marketers to understand the perception of college students in using OSNs with regard to traveling and their willingness to use them.

Limitations of the Research

There are four limitations of this study. This study focuses on current students enrolled in Thai universities and their intention to use OSNs with regard to traveling only. Therefore its findings may not be generalized to other type of students. Secondly, the study is only conducted on respondents located in universities. Therefore its findings may not be generalized to respondents of other people of different age. Thirdly, the objective of this study is to consider the intention of use with regard to OSNs only. Therefore, its findings may not be generalized to other Social Networking activities. Lastly, this study is limited to a specific time frame. Therefore its findings may not be generalized to all time.

Definition of Terms

1. Online Social Network (OSN): OSN often refers to a new kind of virtual communities that structure people or organizations as nodes. This is connected by one or more specific type of interdependency, such as friendship, kinship, web links, common interest, financial exchange, dislike, knowledge, prestige, or relationships of beliefs.

2. Travel 2.0: Travel 2.0 is a term that represents the extension and customization of the concept of Web 2.0 into a form that applies to the world's largest industry: travel and tourism. It defines a transformation of online offerings into a new level of user empowerment and functionality.

3. Electronic World of Mouth (eWOM): In general, eWOM is defined as informal communications directed at consumers in the online environment. Every Internet user can post any positive or negative statement about a product or company, which might be available to a multitude of people and institutions through Internet. Compared to traditional WOM, it is not about interaction between two persons, but rather among a community of individuals who share the same interest.

4. Online Travel Community: Online travel community can be seen as a travel agora and marketplace in which travel information is shared and travelers generate their content.

5. Social Media: Social media are media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. They focus on developing and delivering message. Social media cross the boundaries of OSNs and have taken more advertising and marketing power (Wheeler, 2010).

6. Pew Internet & American Life Project: The Pew Internet & American Life Project is one of the seven projects that make up the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan, nonprofit "fact tank" that provides information on the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping America and the world. The Project produces reports exploring the impacts of the internet on families, communities, work and home, daily life, education, health care, and civic and political life.

7. Online Travel Community: Online travel community can be seen as a travel agora and marketplace in which travel information is shared and travelers generate their content.

8. User Generated Content (UGC): UGC refers to various kinds of media content, publicly available, that are produced by end-users (Wikipedia, 2006). It

appears in many forms on the Internet (e.g. videos, podcasts and posts on discussion groups, blogs, and social media sites) and comprises various types of media source or creative works (written, audio, visual, and combined) created by ordinary users of websites. Examples of websites based on UGC include Flickr, Friends Reunited, eBay, Blogspot, YouTube, and Wikipedia.

9. Travel Planning: Trip planning is defined as a new trip that requires travel information, such as flight, hotel or car rental, while SNSs represent an important part of the travelers' aggregate information source form other trusted friends.

10. Perception: Perception is the particular interpretation one gives to objects or opinions observed or otherwise brought to the consumer's attention through the senses (Walters, 1989).

11. eMarketer: eMarketer publishes data, analysis and insights on digital marketing, media and commerce. We do this by gathering information from many sources, filtering it, and putting it into perspective. For more than a decade, leading companies have trusted this approach, and have relied on eMarketer to help them make better business decisions.

12. Symfony: is an Open Source PHP Web applications development framework.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is meant to illustrate the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. This study is based on the intention to use social media to test the relationships between the perception of the use of social media (benefits of use, and incentives to use) and the intention to use social media when organizing and taking vacation trips. But it was found by Parra-López, et al. (2009) that there is no relationship between costs and intention. Also, Gretzel's and Yoo's (2008) study has not found a significant relationship between the costs of using social media and the intentions of using it. Probably the generalization of the use of these

tools and their improved facility of use have caused the use of OSNs in organizing and taking vacation trips to be not limited anymore by these costs. Therefore, the conceptual framework (see Figure 2) will not consider the cost of use. Moreover, based on the theories related to the variables, indicating that depending on one's nationality, gender and disposable money, one might have different perceptions when using OSN with regard to traveling. This study will thus examine the differences between demographic and perceived benefit of use and incentive to use. The respondents' demographic profile and their perception toward the use of OSN is the independent variable in the conceptual framework. The intention to use OSNs with regard to traveling is the dependent variable.

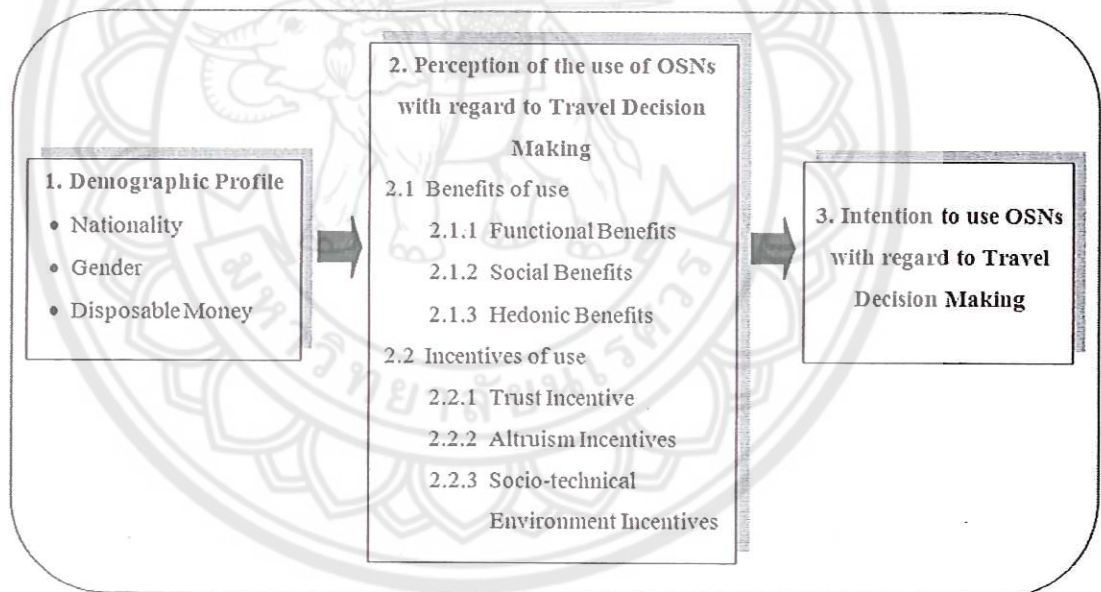


Figure 2 The Model of the use OSNs with regard to traveling

Source: Created by the author for this study.

Independent Variables

1. Demographic Profile

1.1 Nationality

College student from different countries may use different SNSs, and search different information source for travel planning. It is important to know their nationalities when investigating external factors.

1.2 Gender

Differences between males and females might result in different perceptions of use of OSNs with regard to traveling, in terms of one's expectation as to the benefits of use and incentives.

1.3 Disposable money

Most college students have no income, but it does not mean they have hardly any money. They love to spend on discretionary items and purchase way beyond their years. Their basic needs are met by their parents (to an extent) so these students have money to spend on traveling. Disposable money in this study therefore refers to the amount of "play money" available to college students for saving or spending.

2. Perception of the use of OSNs with regard to Travel Decision Making

Perception of the use of OSNs with regard to Travel Decision Making is divided into 2 dimensions; Benefits of Use and Incentives of Use

2.1 Benefits of Use

There are three benefits used in this variable: functional, social and psychological benefits. They contribute to users' involvement in OSNs, and to the evaluation of the OSN tools in travel planning and travel information sharing.

2.1.1 Functional Benefits

This is the basic element to evaluate the benefit of using OSNs with regard to traveling, since OSN provides the tools enabling travelers to obtain up-to-date travel information and activities interests. Collaborative activities on SNSs

might help travelers obtain more useful information from others, and also enhance their travel plan quality.

2.1.2 Social Benefits

Travelers use OSNs to keep in contact with others who share the same interests in travel information, which gives a chance to travelers to come together, communicate and receive help and support from each other. Hence, the personal relationships with people with similar motivations on their trips increase.

2.1.3 Hedonic Benefits

Basically, people are joining SNSs for enjoyment and entertainment purposes. Thus, perceived enjoyment and fun have a significant influence on the users' intentions. Also while travelers use an OSN, they might have a sense of belonging and affiliation with other users.

2.2 Incentives of Use

The increasing trust in OSNs is an incentive to continue using such. At the same time, if tourists receive useful travel information from others, they might feel obligated to generate and contribute. Moreover, the ease of access will cause travelers to use the OSN routinely. Therefore, this section proposed three kinds of incentives of using OSNs with regard to traveling, including trust, altruism and Socio-technical environment incentives.

2.2.1 Trust Incentive

Trust incentives refer to users' trust of the travel information from others. If it is perceived as true and not deceitful information, the trust in information will increase users' intentions to use.

2.2.2 Altruism Incentives

Altruism incentives concern travelers who are interested in sharing what they know about travel. This information may benefit others, so they feel proud of doing that. Additionally, if a traveler has received some recommendations or tips regarding traveling, he/she might feel an obligation to contribute as well.

2.2.3 Socio-technical environment Incentives

Socio-technical environment incentives relate to the usage of OSNs in a region (in schools, in services, in businesses, in travel, etc.) whether widely adopted or not. To some extent, individuals' use of OSNs in organizing a trip and contributing travel information influence others' use.

Dependent Variable

1. Intention to Use OSNs with regard to Travel Decision Making

The intention to use OSNs with regard to travel decision making refers to whether travelers are willing or they intend to use it for travel planning and related information sharing. This study will verify whether their intentions translate into a willingness to participate in OSNs and recommend to friends or family to use it when planning trips or sharing travel information during their trips or upon their return.

