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Critical review of patterns, roles, and influences of social media in tourism

Warayuts Choonhawong, Sangsan Phumsathan*

Department of Conservation, Faculty of Forestry, Kasetsart University, Bangkok 10900, Thailand

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Abstract

Presently, social media has influenced the tourism industry in various dimensions, especially tourists' behavior. In this manner, understanding the overall patterns, roles, and influences of social media in tourism is very necessary. This paper provides an understanding of how social media has influenced tourism. The study is divided into two parts. The first part focused on analyzing the patterns and role of social media use in tourism. 95 popular social media and websites related to tourism were analyzed by using descriptive statistics and content analysis. The second part examined the influences of social media on human behaviors. The data were gathered from 113 academic international peer-reviewed journals published during 2013–2021. In addition, 24 research papers were selected to analyze the relationships and the effect size between social media and human behavior by applying meta-analysis. The results showed that the patterns of social media related to tourism were diverse. The most popular social network sites were Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, respectively. The account owners could be classified into four groups. Travel bloggers were the majority group of owners, followed by general users, government institution/state enterprises, and tourism corporations. Additionally, it was found that information from websites and social media related to tourism consequently influenced travel decision making of tourists. Based on meta-analysis, the results confirmed that social media has a strong influence on the subjective norm and intention toward behavior. The results imply that social media will help to encourage more appropriate behaviors in tourists and can be applied to disseminate information to tourists before they visit the destination.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: fforssp@ku.ac.th (S. Phumsathan).

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Introduction

In modern society, social media, as web-based online tools, is an efficient tool for disseminating information. The two-way communication on social media can present content in various formats, including visual and audio (Manning, 2014; Mayfield, 2008). Presently, there are 4.66 billion internet users worldwide and 48.59 million user accounts in Thailand (Kemp, 2021a and Kemp, 2021b). In terms of the tourism industry, the role of social media relates to tourism in multidimensional perspectives. At national level, in many countries, tourism development policies have been formulated using social media as an important strategy to drive development. For tourists, social media has also influenced every process of travel, such as searching for information about destinations, reacting to or participating in tourism activities, communicating during the trip, and sharing experiences after the trip (Fotis et al., 2012; Sangkamanee, 2014). All ages of tourists use the internet to search for information and plan trips, in particular, among modern tourists who use web 2.0 and social media to communicate with online agents (Bizirgianni & Dionysopoulou, 2013; Kim et al., 2015). This situation has been confirmed by the fact that most tourists have social media accounts, i.e., Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. This shows interest in travel planning by tourism review on social media. Additionally, many studies confirmed that proper use of social media in tourist management would affect tourists' behavior (Abdurrahim et al., 2019; Fotis et al., 2012; Ravindran et al., 2019; Sangkamanee, 2014). In all of the above, social media can be applied to the perspective of tourism management (Jadhav et al., 2018). Therefore, this study was intended to: (1) study the patterns, and roles of social media related to tourism in different perspectives; and (2) examine the influences of social media on human behaviors.

Literature Review

Social media is a group of applications on the internet that were developed from one-way communication on web 1.0 to two-way communication on web 2.0. The message from website owners could only be sent to users by web 1.0. Consequently, this changed when

Web 2.0 arrived allowing communication between users in the form of consumer-generated media (CGM). CGM was the starting point for the development of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As it is more convenient and faster than other media, the demands and communication behaviors have changed, especially for users between 15–24 years old (known as generation Z). Thus, with a rapid increase, there were 4.20 billion mobile social media users in 2020, or 53.6 percent of the world population (Kemp, 2021a; Zeitel-Bank & Tat, 2014). The number of users in 2020 presented that there was an increase of 490 million social media users, or 13.20 percent from the previous year, and the top three social media platforms with the most users were Facebook (2,740 million), YouTube (2,291 million), and WhatsApp (2,000 million) (Kemp, 2021a).

Social media can be divided into 7 categories according to their purpose of use. There are: (1) social network sites; (2) blogs; (3) collaborative projects or wikis; (4) podcast; (5) forum (web 2.0); (6) content communities; and (7) microblogs (Mayfield, 2008). Understanding them will help users to choose to suit the purpose of use. Nowadays, social media plays a major role in tourism as an information source for sharing knowledge and experiences among tourists as well as promoting tourism services. Consequently, it creates a positive influence on the tourism image and attitude of the tourist destinations. For tourism planning, social media plays a vital role from finding information to decision making. It has caused changes in terms of providing information, building an understanding of providing services to tourists, and increased channels for booking and purchasing travel programs. In addition, social media can also be a tool to increase knowledge and understanding of tourists (Lu & Phumsathan, 2015; Mir, 2017; Phumsathan et al., 2018). In addition to the current tourism, there are various types of tourists. Modern tourists have changed their behaviors both in terms of higher environmental responsibility, higher frequency of travel with shorter periods of time, the need for fast travel services, the need for fast travel services, and choosing a service that meets different personal health needs and individual needs (Hudson, 2008). The travelling process comprises of three main stages, including pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip. The details of each stage of the travel and how social media can impact each stage are explained in [Table 1](#).

Table 1 Travel planning process

Duration	Stage	Description
Pre-trip	Need recognition	Tourists' internal stimulus or push factor (such as boredom, the need to escape the daily lifestyle or the need for rest) and external stimulus or pull factor (such as ads on various media, travel TV program, or recognition of others' traveling) have caused an imbalance of the desired state as well as the actual stage of tourists' own travel needs. In this stage, the development of social media has made communication more comfortable. Tourists can send information to each other at any time. As a result, the desire to travel can be stimulated more often when using social media.
	Search for information	It is a step that influences decision making for travel. People will search for the information related to their tentative trip both internal source (from memory or the experiences of tourists) and external source (from personal contact such as friends or family and public resources). Presently, searching the information from various media such as newspapers, magazines, documentaries, radio and television programs, and also social media reviews has become a general characteristic of tourist. In this stage, sharing information related to tourism both from the promotion of entrepreneurs and from tourists within social media represents that social media has become a source of various tourism information for travelers.
	Evaluation of alternatives	In modern society, social media is a great tool for communication. This causes the exchange of information on travel destinations and opinions among members within the travel group. Tourists will consider the best option to travel based on their information. This could be a self-assessment or a joint assessment with another person such as family, friends, or previous tourists.
During-trip	Purchase decision	In this stage, social media is now a popular travel promotion channel. This allows social media users to be fully informed on all aspects and to make the right travel decisions based on their expectations. Tourists will decide the pattern of tourism that can meet their needs. The decision is mostly influenced by information and environment.
Post-trip	Post-purchase behavior	Traveler satisfaction is reflected in social media travel reviews. Tourists evaluate the satisfaction of their travel experience compared to their expectation before the trip. This results in this stage normally being presented in terms of word of mouth (WOM), electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), tourism review and brand loyalty. Additionally, sharing these travel experiences will either become retrieving information or fuel other social media users' travel-related expectations.

Source: Adapted from Blackwell et al. (2012)

Methodology

This study comprises of two main parts including: (1) the patterns and roles of social media related to tourism in different perspectives; and (2) the influences of social media on human behaviors. In the first part, documentary research was applied in this study. Official documents as a source material were collected from 95 social media and websites related to tourism using the purposive sampling method, based on the most popular website rankings in the search engine (google.co.th) and the highest popularity of users during the year 2019–2020. In this part, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data, which included the account owners, site characteristics, and social media platform, to explain the patterns of social media related tourism.

In the part of the roles of social media, content analysis was applied to describe the content sections such as experience, activities, topics, languages, channels, and objectives.

In the second part, the influence of social media was analyzed by applying meta-analysis to confirm the influence of social media with secondary data relating to the influence of social media on human behavior. Resources on the one-search database of Kasetsart University and Google scholar were selected. The keywords in searching included social media, social network, web 2.0, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), consumer-generated media, influence, impact, tourist, traveler, consumer, and behavior. The 113 academic international peer-reviewed journal, such as Scopus and ISI, published during 2013–2021 were selected. Based on the 113 research articles, there were

24 research papers that studied about the relationships and the effect size between social media and human behavior, i.e., effect size, relationships, or influences of social media and psychological factors (such as attitude toward behavior, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, intention toward behavior) on human behavior.

Results and Discussion

The Patterns of Social Media Related to Tourism

According to the survey of 95 websites and social media related to tourism in Thailand, the majority of website owners was travel bloggers (67.37%), followed by general users (16.84%), government institutions/state enterprises (11.58%) and tourism corporations (4.21 %). Considering the basic usage characteristics, the results found that most characteristics were the social network site (34.74%), followed by content sharing (27.37%) and websites (17.90%). Facebook was ranked as the most popular social media based on user account (43.59%), followed by Instagram (21.79%) and YouTube and TripAdvisor (10.26%) respectively (Table 2).

The result shows that the patterns of social media correspond with the global and Thailand digital yearbook 2021. In Thailand, the results found the most active accounts were YouTube, followed by Facebook and Instagram. This trend was similar to the global situation (Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram). Presently, there are 4.20 billion social media accounts. This accounted for 13.2 percent increase from 2019. In 2020, internet users worldwide spent an average of two hours, 25 minutes per day on social media (Kemp, 2021a). Additionally, many studies found that, normally, the social media users have an account on Facebook. It could be implied that Facebook is one of the important tools for communication among tourists. In conclusion, social media have a significant role in tourism industry in order to support tourism marketing, encouraging travel decision making, and creating new relationship among tourists (Al-Azawei, 2018; Lu & Phumsathan, 2015).

The Roles of Social Media Related to Tourism

To explain the roles of social media related to tourism in Thailand, the content analysis covering six aspects including experience, activities, topics news/information, languages, channels of media, and objectives is described as follows (Table 3 and Table 4):

Table 2 The usage pattern of social media related tourism.

(n = 95)			
Analysis Issues	Type	Number	Percent
Owner	Travel bloggers	64	67.37
	General users	16	16.84
	Government institution/State enterprises	11	11.58
	Tourism corporations	4	4.21
Site Characteristic	Social network	33	34.74
	Content sharing	26	27.37
	Website	17	17.90
	Web 2.0/Forum	14	14.74
	Micro-blogging sites	3	3.16
	Blog	2	2.11
Social media type	Facebook	34	43.59
	Instagram	17	21.79
	YouTube	8	10.26
	TripAdvisor	8	10.26
	Pantip	6	7.69
	Twitter	3	3.85
	Other	2	2.56

Table 3 Content and message in social media related tourism.

Content	Message	Overall	Tourism providers	Tourist
Experience	Nature & Outdoor	88	35.34	58.33
	Food/Shopping/Entertainment	75	30.12	25.00
	History/Religion/Museum	51	20.48	8.33
	Culture & Festival	35	14.06	8.33
Activity	Site seeing & photographing	47.61	27.18	55.31
	Adventure activities	31.92	29.13	32.97
	Waterfalls	7.45	8.74	6.96
	Picnic	2.93	10.68	0.00
	Nature learning	5.85	21.36	0.00
	Culture learning	4.26	2.91	4.76
Travel planning information	News/Information	29.35	28.46	29.59
	Public relation/Place suggestion	24.23	31.71	22.25
	Review	13.82	0.81	17.28
	Advertisement	10.58	11.38	10.37
	Planning	10.41	13.01	9.72
	Education	5.63	5.69	5.62
	Communication	5.12	4.88	5.18
	Booking	0.85	4.07	0.00
Languages	Thai	66.67	31.71	81.44
	English	18.12	17.07	18.56
	East Asian languages	1.35	14.63	0.00
	Other	13.86	36.59	0.00
Channels	Pictures	38.46	35.71	39.11
	Articles	31.67	35.71	30.73
	Videos	28.96	26.19	29.61
	Others	0.90	2.38	0.56
Objective	To inform	59.46	40.54	61.67
	To persuade	27.03	29.73	21.67
	To entertain	9.46	13.51	11.67
	To educate	4.05	16.22	5.00

Table 4 Comparison of the content among four primary groups of social media owners

Content	Government/ state enterprise		Tourism company		Blogger		Traveller/ general user	
	Number of websites	Percent	Number of websites	Percent	Number of websites	Percent	Number of websites	Percent
Experience	17	6.03	7	7.95	191	17.78	34	15.25
Activity	91	32.27	12	13.64	223	20.76	50	22.42
Travel planning information	91	32.27	32	36.36	383	35.66	80	35.87
Languages	24	8.51	17	19.32	81	7.54	16	7.17
Channels	30	10.64	12	13.64	147	13.69	32	14.35
Objective	29	10.28	8	9.09	49	4.56	11	4.93
	282	100.00	88	100.00	1074	100.00	223	100.00

Experience: The tourism providers (government institution/state enterprises and tourism company) usually presented experiences related to nature tourism & outdoor activities (58.33%), followed by food/shopping/entertainment (25.00%) and history/religion/museum and culture & festival (8.33%). Similarly, the results presented, that tourists, (travel bloggers and social network users) usually presented the experience about nature & outdoor (32.89%), followed by food/shopping/entertainment (30.67%) and history/religion/museum (21.78%).

Activities: The tourism providers presented the content related to adventure activities (29.13%) followed by site seeing & photographing (27.18%), and nature learning (21.36%) respectively. Tourists presented the content related to site seeing & photographing (55.31%), followed by adventure activities (32.97%), and waterfalls (6.96%) respectively.

Travel planning information: The tourism providers presented the most topics related to public relations (31.71%), followed by news/information (28.46%) and planning (13.01%). Tourists presented the topics related to news/information (29.59%), followed by trip suggestions (22.25%) and trip reviews (17.28%).

Languages: in Thailand, the languages mostly used by the tourism providers is Thai (31.71%), followed by English (17.07%) and East Asian languages (14.63%). Communications between tourists were found only in Thai (81.44%) and English (18.56%).

Channels: The tourism providers used the pictures and articles to communicate with tourists as priority (35.71%), followed by videos (26.19%). Similarly, tourists usually used pictures (39.11%), followed by articles (30.73%) and videos (29.61%).

Objectives: In terms of tourism providers, they used social media “to inform” their clients (40.54%), followed by “to persuade” (29.73%) and “to educate” (16.22%). For tourists, the priority was “to inform” (61.67%), followed by “to persuade” (21.67%) and “to entertain” (11.67%).

The details presented in Table 4 explain that the government/state enterprise primarily focused on tourism activities and travel planning information while tourism company, bloggers, and travelers took important roles in providing travel planning information that is really important for a trip as it helps travelers plan their trips well ahead of time.

In this part, the results present that both tourism providers and tourists primarily used social media “to inform” and “to persuade” for tourism with experience, content, and topics in the same direction. The results were consistent with previous research that social media related to tourism is mainly used to provide information, persuade tourists, and to promote tourism programs, as Thailand has many advertisements through social media and the audience is increasing every year (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2018). Tourists rely on information and experience sharing from previous tourists and the tourism providers. For languages, tourism providers’ websites usually used various language, more than tourist websites. This is because of the diversity of international tourists that are from different countries, especially the East Asian languages such as the Chinese language responding to the growth rate of Chinese tourists today (Cheer & Han, 2018). The results also presented that from the information in websites, both tourism providers and tourist websites are mostly presented in pictures, which corresponds with previous studies that visual communication had an effect on cognition, attractiveness, and took less time than other forms (Alboqami et al., 2015). However, the role of social media in the part of educating and creating environmental awareness is also important, especially ecotourism (Ana & Istudor, 2019). But the objective of “to educate” and the topics of education were low ranked. Government institutions that are responsible for tourism areas should pay attention to this role.

The Influence of Social Media Related to Human Behavior

Based on 113 research articles (published during 2013–2021) related to the study about the influences of social media on psychological factors affecting human behavior, the results show that the most of the study was done on Facebook (34.88%), followed by Twitter (20.93%) and Instagram and LinkedIn (9.30%) (Table 5). Most studies focused on intention toward behavior (61.95%), followed by attitude toward behavior (21.24%) and behavior characteristics (10.62%) while the least study was the subjective norm (1.77 %) (Table 6).

Table 5 Types of social media being studied on the influence of social media on behavior

No.	Types of social media	Percent
1	Facebook	34.88
2	Twitter	20.93
3	Instagram	9.30
4	LinkedIn	9.30
5	Google+	6.98
6	Blackboard	2.33
7	Web 2.0	2.33
8	SM-Advertising	2.33
9	e-WOM	2.33
10	N/A	9.30

Table 6 Studies of the influence of social media on psychological factors

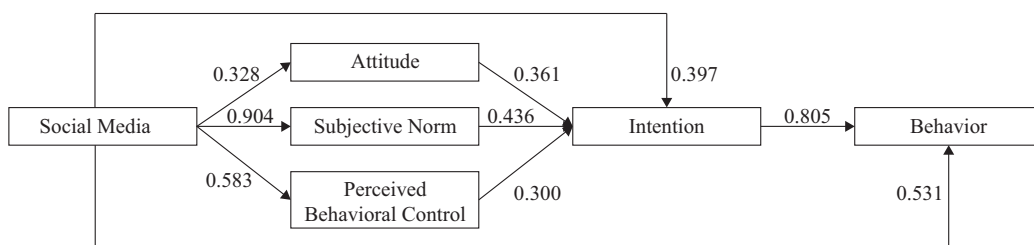
Psychological factor	Total	
	Frequency	Percent
Behavior	12	10.62
Intention toward behaviors	70	61.95
Attitude toward behaviors	24	21.24
Subjective norm	2	1.77
Perceived behavioral control	5	4.42
Total	113	100.00

The most important psychological factors in this study mainly involved human behavior and intention toward behavior. Additionally, other factors that explain the intention toward behavior, i.e., attitude toward behaviors, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control were included. These results were consistent with the theory of planned behavior (TBA). This theory explains that there are three core components including

attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control that significantly influence individual's behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991).

To analyze the relationships and the effect size between social media and human behavior, the 24 research articles were analyzed by applying meta-analysis. The model shows that social media has a strong influence on the subjective norm (90.4%) and influenced perceived behavioral control (58.3%), intention toward behaviors (39.7%) and attitude towards behaviors (32.8%) in moderate level. Behaviors were significantly influenced by intention toward behavior (80.5%) and social media (53.1%) (Figure 1). Social media enables users who are interested in the same topics to create communities in a simulated world on the internet. Member's behaviors within social media affect the perceptions of other members. Consequently, this would lead them show behavior in the real world. Combined with the direct influence of social media on behaviors, the ability of two-way communication is easily accessible and creates trends. This is an effective tool for predicting human behavior (Kwon & Jung, 2013; Rajendran & Thesinghraj, 2014).

The results corresponded with the previous studies that tourists' behavior is affected by the trust of information through social media, which has a high influence on tourist's behavior (Bizirgianni & Dionysopoulou, 2013; Erkan & Evans, 2016; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Some studies argue that the factors influencing tourists' behavior are disputable, but social media continues to influence behavior related tourism (Jadhav et al., 2018; Parra-López et al., 2011). In this manner, social media can be used for promotion and implementation of information to understand and adjust tourists' behavior (Jadhav et al., 2018; Kemp, 2021a).

**Figure 1** The effect of social media influence on factors affecting human behaviors based on theory of planned behavior (TBA) (Ajzen, 1991)

Note: The numbers in the model explain the effect size or the strength of the relationship between two variables.

In Thailand, tourists' perceptions related to tourism through social media are very high, which is consistent with rapid access and the facilitates of social media. Accuracy of information and presentation techniques influence trust in information via social media, making travel planning clearer. This demonstrates social media influences on travel decision making among Thailand tourists (Permcheevit & Cheyjunya, 2018; Tantipongnant & Jaiherm, 2020). The proper usage of social media increases the trust of the information, affecting the knowledge and satisfaction of the tourism experience when they arrive at the destination, reflecting social media's roles in encouraging tourism. Thus, social media is an important tool in the role of educating and raising appropriate behavior as well (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2018; Cheyjunya, 2015).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The purpose of this paper was to study social media related tourism in two parts. The first part focused on the patterns and role of social media in tourism. This part was analyzed based on the characteristics of 95 websites related to tourism. The second part examined the influences of social media on human behaviors. The 113 academic international peer-reviewed journal published during 2013–2021 were selected. Additionally, the 24 research papers which studied about the relationships and the effect size between social media and human behavior were analyzed by applying meta-analysis to confirm the influence of social media on human behavior.

Based on the survey of 95 websites and social media related to tourism in Thailand, the results found that social network site is the major type of social media and Facebook was the most popular of social media sites. Travel blogger group was the biggest group of account owners. For the roles of social media related to tourism, the experiences related to nature tourism & outdoor activities is one of the most popular posts with high levels of user engagement. Site seeing and photographing were mostly presented by pictures on topics related to news/information. English and Thai are primary languages in the objective of “to inform” and “to persuade”. The meta-analysis (based on 24 research articles published during 2013–2021) showed that most of the study was done on Facebook and Twitter. Most studies focused on intention

toward behavior and attitude toward behavior. By applying the theory of planned behavior, the results from meta-analysis confirmed that social media has the strong influence on the subjective norm that has occurred when tourists perceived knowledge-sharing in travel-related online social networks. Moreover, behaviors were very much influenced by intention toward behavior and social media.

In conclusion, the patterns of social media related tourism are most currently used on Facebook by travel bloggers, in the role of “to inform” and “to persuade”. Social media influenced the subjective norm and intention toward behavior that affect tourists' behavior. This study demonstrates the gap in the education role. The users related to tourism (travel bloggers, government institution/state enterprises, tourism corporations, and general users) should pay attention to this function. The patterns, roles, and influences of social media in tourism can be used as a guideline for managing tourist's behavior before they arrive at the destination. For implications for practice, this study will help to manage the promotion of tourism through social media more effectively. First, the results of this study suggested that, to meet the needs of social media users who are interested in experiences and other activities, government/state enterprise should distribute information about the destination and trip planning should be updated. This information could help travelers evaluate alternatives and make travel decisions. It should also present more information in English to expand the communication channel for foreigners. Secondly, the study also showed the influence of social media on the norm of reference group (i.e. traveller bloggers) was very high. It indicates that social media influences human behavior through the perception of information in social media. Therefore, we can use social media to promote quality tourism and create appropriate expectation of tourists.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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