

Chinese Independent Traveler Decision-Making Process through  
China Based Social Media of Renren

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To my beloved father and mother, relatives and friends.

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## ABSTRACT

The internet communication technology has change the ways tourist do action of information search when they were in decision-making process. The social network websites are the platform for travelers seeking and sharing traveling experience and tourism information. As a form of electronic word-of-mouth communication, these experienced travelers' information had a significant influence on the potential travelers, who are the users of social networking website, when they were in tourist decision-making process. This study investigated the tourism information content emerging on the one of the famous social networking website in China named Renren. And it explored how it influences the Chinese independent travelers to conduct their travel decision-making process in Southeast Asia. The mixed methods analysis approach was applied for two round data analysis. The first round analysis is to investigate the most visited destination in Southeast Asia and common tourism information on Renren website. The findings indicated that Thailand and Malaysia are the most visited destination for Chinese independent travelers. And tourist itinerary and destination information are the most comment information emerging on Renren website. The second round analysis is to investigate which stage of tourist decision-making process gets most influences. The finding shows that the stage of felt desire travel and information search get most influences. The results of this study can help tourism marketers notice trends in travel consumers 'decision-making process as well as a new venue to promote their products. The e-WOM on social networking website will lead to better marketing performance and product enhancement.

## ABSTRAK

Teknologi komunikasi laman sesawang atau 'internet' telah mengubah pelancong dalam pencarian maklumat apabila mereka berada dalam proses membuat keputusan. Laman-laman sesawang rangkaian sosial adalah platform untuk pelancong yang mencari, berkongsi pengalaman perjalanan dan maklumat pelancongan. Sebagai salah satu bentuk komunikasi elektronik, pengalaman pelancong mempunyai pengaruh yang besar terhadap pelancong yang berpotensi yang juga merupakan pengguna laman sesawang rangkaian social ketika mereka dalam proses membuat keputusan. Kajian ini mengenai kandungan maklumat pelancongan yang baru muncul di salah satu laman sesawang rangkaian sosial yang terkenal di China bernama Renren. Ia diterokai bagaimana ia mempengaruhi pelancong bebas Cina untuk membuat keputusan pengembaraan mereka di Asia Tenggara. Pendekatan kaedah campuran telah digunakan untuk dua pusingan analisa data. Analisa pusingan pertama adalah untuk mengkaji tempat yang kerap dilawati di Asia Tenggara dan juga maklumat pelancongan yang biasa pada laman sesawang Renren. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa Thailand dan Malaysia adalah destinasi yang paling kerap dilawati untuk pelancong bebas Cina. Analisa pusingan kedua pula adalah untuk mengkaji peringkat manakah proses membuat keputusan yang paling mempengaruhi. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa peringkat keinginan untuk melancong dan juga pencarian maklumat adalah yang paling mempengaruhi. Keputusan daripada kajian ini akan membantu pemasaran pelancongan menyedari trend pelancong dalam proses membuat keputusan dan juga tempat baru untuk mempromosikan produk. E-WOM di laman sesawang rangkaian sosial akan membawa kepada prestasi pemasaran yang lebih baik dan peningkatan produk.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CNNIC	-	China Internet Network Information Center
e-WOM	-	Electronic Word of Mouth
ICT	-	Internet Communication Technology
UGC	-	User Generated Content
WOM	-	Word of Mouth

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Background

If people regard the Internet as a kind of invention, then there is no doubt, it is the one of the greatest inventions which has been changing the way of people's lifestyle and communicative approach in the human history. It has developed from small campus network into a global social communication tools (Johan et al., 2010). The buzzword of Web 2.0 has created new ways to communicate, collaborate and share content (Enders et al., 2008). Social media is any kind of information that users share with our social network using social networking websites or services.

The Internet brings people closer together than ever before, and allows people with like interests to easily connect even if they're thousands of miles away. People can now interact with one another and therefore, Internet has become a social medium. Current Statistics from List of social networking websites show that in 2014, social media and specifically, social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook with 1.11 billion users (Wikipedia Facebook, 2013), Twitter with 0.2 billion users (Wikipedia Twitter, 2013) and YouTube with 1 billion visit each month (Wikipedia YouTube, 2013). In China, Tencent QQ with 0.712 billion (Wikipedia Tencent QQ, 2013), Sina Weibo with 0.4 billion (Wikipedia Sina Weibo, 2013), Renren with 0.28 billion (Wikipedia RenRen, 2013), were a popular online activity in terms of average time spent. Currently, there are 198 SNS in 2014.

Web 2.0 and online social networking websites heavily affect today most of the online activities and their effect on tourism is obviously rather important. Social networking website allows people with no special knowledge to post and share content with the world immediately. Various forms of user-generated content (UGC) such as blogs, forums, virtual community, have gained substantial popularity in online travelers' use of the Internet (Gretzel, 2006; Pan, MacLaurin, and Crotts, 2007). These forms provide to user with a collection of various interaction possibilities, ranging from a simple chat to multiple video conferences, and from the exchange of plain email messages to the participation in blogs and discussion groups. Online social networks may also contain categorized relationships (e.g. former classmates), means to connect with friends (with self-assembled description pages), or recommendation systems for some kind of objects or activities.

Tourists need a sort of high level of reliable information in the making decision to purchases of tourism products, which involves amount of risk-taking caused by the complexity of the products. Tourist cannot make an advanced judgment for the quality of the products without precondition in products experience. The internet as one of information sources has fundamentally changed the way of gathering information which is used for tourists' decision-making of tourism product consumption. The posted information in social networking website through consumer-generated content, which is a form of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication, giving a reliable image of the tourism product before purchase is being utilized by today's tourists in their travel decision making. Social networking platforms are built from the "collective knowledge" of consumers and are directed to consumers (O'Reilly, 2005). The information is more consumers oriented and thus much better acceptable as real and faraway of marketers'.

On social networking website, different types of users exist, such as residents of the destination, potential travelers to the destination, and travelers who have been to the destination before. These users can provide advice to other travelers

regarding their experience at the destination. This information is used to make decision of how to arrive the destination (mean of transportation), what kind activities could be taken, and as well as where to stay at the destination (accommodations). Subsequently the social networking has become an important information source for tourists to utilize as they plan their trip.

In recent years, as the improvement of people's living standard. The tourist's criteria of evaluation and satisfaction has been increasing in the process of leisure tourism. Independent Tours as a fresh form of tourism is getting more and more the praise highly of tourists, especially young generation. In this study, it focuses on the Renren, as one of the most popular social networking website in China, is called as "a Chinese copy of Facebook". Renren is one of most popular social networking website among college students. It has the variety and comprehensive functions and applications for users having their social network in the virtual community. These features of Renren offer a platform to consumers for showing and sharing their travel-related comments, opinions, and personal experiences, which then provide as information source for others who also want to travel the same place in the planning. This information directly affects the process of tourism decision-making.

### **1.1 Research Problem Background**

The internet has fundamentally changed the way of getting information which is used for travel planning and tourism product consumption (Buhalis and Law, 2008), which according to Buhalis (2003), it is a very extensive information industry. In fact, virtual tourist communities in which tourists exchange opinions and experiences have been around for more than 10 years now, but lately we have seen an expansion of Web 2.0 technologies into tourism. This evolution of the Internet and the

apparition of the social networking platforms on scene are of great importance for the tourism industry. It is shifting from a business-to-consumer marketing to a peer-to-peer model for the sharing of information (J. Miguéns *et al.*, 2008).

Social networking website is an information center, where individual consumer can search for information conveniently and cost effectively as well as retrieve information, maintain connections, develop relationships and make travel decisions (Stepchenkova *et al.*, 2007). Online travel virtual communities represent the information as one potential solution for tourist to focus their decision-making process. The results of a recent study which focused on the use of online reviews for trip planning revealed that 82.5% respondents use the Internet for pleasure travel planning, and 90% indicated that they read travel reviews in online travel communities (Gretzel *et al.*, 2007). In addition, research has found that 79% of online community members stay in regular contact with at least one of the online communities that they have used (Horrigan, 2001). The information posted in online travel communities is an influential e-WOM form of communication that is being utilized by today's travelers in their travel decision making.

It is interesting to note that with the expansive body of information available on the social networking website, many travelers' online information searches have become futile. For example, when potential customers try to looking for relevant information from Facebook specific to their travel interest and purpose which is likely to be a solution to the problem, it leads to information overload due to the vast amount of diverse information available on the Internet, thus often resulting in travelers acquiring irrelevant information (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006).

Tourist decision-making process has been interested by tourism researchers such as Fodness and Murray (1999), Kerstetter and Cho (2004), Snepenger, et al (1990), Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) for a number of years. Early research that has been conducted is primarily focused on the factors that influence and improve the decision making ability of travel recommendation systems (Jeng and Fesenmaier,



2002). It is only recently that researchers have begun to focus on how travelers use the information on the social networking website to plan their trips. There is little study which sought to investigate the content of social networking website as form of e-WOM in the context of traveling decision-making process. This research seeks to add the body knowledge of taking an investigation of common information, modal, knowledge, tips or suggestion to the tourists, who are involved in the process of decision making, when using Renren.

## **1.2 Research Question**

When traveler involve in decision-making process, they could obtain much information through a variety of means. The information was used for their trip planning process, such as selecting destination, designing itinerary, deciding accommodation, transportation and so on. However, some of information emerging on internet is irrelevant and unreliable with travelers' needs.

Through social networking website, traveler could find specific information related to their travel preference and purpose. And this information is more reliable than that from marketer and promoter. Thus, it could be a solution for the traveler's problem.

This study is to investigate of the traveler conducting the tourist decision-making process when using tourism information content of social networking website. This proposed research will aim to answer all the following Main questions:

1. What the destinations and attractions in Southeast Asia are emerged on Renren website?

2. What type of information do tourists searching when online traveler use Renren?
3. Which stage of tourist decision-making process gets more effect?

The first question relates to the destination and attractions that emerged on the blog of social networking website. The second question relates to the types of information emerge in the content. The third question deals with the comment of reader representing them in which stage of tourist decision-making process.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

This research is to identify the content of the tourism information on social networking website. And this information influence tourist decision-making process. Thus, the main objectives of this research stated below:

1. To investigate and explore the types of tourism information content on social networking website
2. To identify the destination and attractions that emerge on the blog of Renren website, specifically traveling information in the context of Southeast Asia countries
3. To identify which stage of tourist decision-making process gets more influence by using Renren.

## **1.4 Research Scope**

The research scope contains the limitation and aspects which were studied in the research. It is regarded as guidance for the research. It ensures that research would be conducted within boundaries. To fulfill the aims and objectives that have been set up, this study has the following scopes:

1. The theory, concept, and model tourist decision-making process in tourism.
2. Renren as the one of most famous social media website was selected for this study.
3. The scope is further narrowed down by selecting the blog of experienced traveler writing their independent traveling experience in Southeast Asia counties.
4. The comment which could represent the stage of decision-making process.

## **1.5 The Significant Of Study**

This research is an attempt to contribute to the knowledge on online travel communities by exploring online travel community postings (e-WOM) and their influence on travel decisions. This study examines the online travel community use for information search and its influences on travel decisions. It will make it clear that in this information era how the tourists make traveling plans with social media networks. Comparing with the traditional ways to get information about traveling plans, some changes will be explained so that some reasonable and effective information channels will assist tourists to make better traveling plans and maximum their fulfillment in the touring experience satisfaction.

Results of this study can help tourism marketers notice trends in travel consumers' decision-making process as well as a new venue to promote their products. It is during the information search stage that marketers can influence traveler's decision making. Therefore, understanding the influence of e-WOM in online travel communities will lead to better marketing performance and product enhancement (Hwang et al., 2006).

### **1.6 Approach of Research**

The research approach is to guide and keep the study following the design. The research will be conducted in four phrases.

1. Preliminary study was conducted by reviewing numbers of document and reading variety of academic journals and previous study. These documents and journals Travel 2.0, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Social Media Platforms, Consumer Decision-Making, Renren website, Independent Travel were the main conception foundation of academic knowledge and information.
2. The second stage of the research is conducting data collection from Renren website which is a typical social networking website. The data will be collected by mining the text of related blogs and the corresponding comment. The random sampling method is used to obtain the final sample.
3. The collected data is analyzed using a priori coding method and categorization through a qualitative method. This is used to find the most frequently-information in order to identify common topics and themes.

4. The result of data analysis is interpreted and a conclusion for study formulated. The limitation of the study will be summarized. Basing on the limitation, the recommendation for future research will be included in this area.

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