



USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PROCESS-EXAMINING A RURAL MOUNTAIN REGION

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ABSTRACT

This research demonstrated a significant method for measuring tourist behavior in terms of social media use for rural mountain region tourism. The study was qualitative, and enabled the discovery of the main thematic issues related to the travel process of tourists when using social media for rural mountain region tourism. The study found four types of themes: (1) social media use in the planning stage of the trip, (2) social media use before the trip, (3) social media use during the trip, and (4) social media use after the trip. The results show that tourists use social media at all stages of travel for rural mountain region tourism. At the first stage (planning), tourists mainly use social media to search for information. It is recommended that tourism-related agencies, whether they are government or private, should focus on the planning stage of tourism to influence tourist behavior toward sustainable rural mountain region tourism.

Key words: Social media; Tourist behavior; Rural mountain region tourism; Sustainable tour process.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Approaches to the qualitative and quantitative evaluation of social media for tourism purposes have been limited. In this study, an attempt was made to discern the wider implications of social media use for rural mountain region tourism, which provided a broader view of the phenomenon. The use of social media in the process of tourism is now standard, according to analyses presented thematically. This study describes interviews conducted with respondents to determine tourist activities in the tour process when using social media. The researchers visited different areas to target rural mountain region tourists, who were supposed to have used social media at least once in the past year. To discern the thematic activities undergone by tourists when using social media at each stage of their trips, an open-ended, semi-structured questionnaire was used. In this study, the focus was on conducting qualitative analysis and highlighting themes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, some summarized definitions and explanations of different internet-based networking concepts are discussed. The definition of social media is easier to understand once Web 2.0 and user-generated content are differentiated. These two concepts became known in the late 20th century as descriptions of the situation that existed when consumers began to experience the benefits of the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee et al., 1994). Some researchers define social media as the conjunction of Web 2.0 and user-generated content (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007). For a more in-depth understanding of the different forms and evolution of SNSs, a detailed discussion is presented here:

2.1 Web 2.0

Web 2.0 denotes a major concept associated with the World Wide Web. This concept has many pervasive uses in terms of usage levels, technological integration, business philosophies, and sociology (Chu & Kim, 2011). The basic concept of Web 2.0 was introduced by O'Reilly and MediaLive (O'reilly, 2005). The line that separates Web 2.0 from Web 1.0 is the existence of direct connections between users (Handsfield et al., 2009). Web 2.0 has the ability to directly connect people, while Web 1.0 is not participatory in nature (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). Some researchers differentiate the concepts further, noting that in Web 2.1 there are very few content creators, and consumers act as content users; in contrast, in Web 2.0, the user can be both the content creator and consumer at the same time (Hsu & Park, 2011). In Web 2.0 applications, users can create many intra- and inter-group discussions to share audio, video, and messages directly with each other (Cormode, 2008). Searching and using Web 1.0 content is passive, and users can only access data that has been created for them, while Web 2.0 content is active, and users can search and use the content they want (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). In similar definitions, some other researchers, such as Sigala, define Web 2.0 as internet-based services that enable users to interact with each other (Murugesan, 2007). Sigala also defines the concept of Web 2.0 in different ways, for example, "Web 2.0 is a tool for online collaboration and... mass communication" (Murugesan, 2007). Some other researchers argue that these tools

enable the masses to interact with each other, and also provide a way to communicate in a responsive way (Murugesan, 2007).

2.2 Blogs

The blog concept was initially introduced by Jorn Barger, who first used the term in 1997 (Wortham, 2007). The short form, “blog,” which is well known among blog users, was first used by Peter Merholz in 1999 (Mohr, 2016). Blogs or weblogs were introduced following a long period of different communication channel start-ups, including Usenet and many other commercial online services such as CompuServe and email (Clyde, 2004). A weblog expert from Canada provides a good definition: a “weblog is a brief message available for [the] public online” (Clyde, 2004). Blogs use a chronological method of communicating information, from the personal diaries of authors to generalized public messages (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007), and are considered to be the earliest form of social media (Peña-López, 2007). Blogs are presented in a conversational form, with bloggers addressing a particular topic they want to publish (McAfee, 2009). Bloggers are considered to be natural users of the internet, in that they create, publish, and respond to blogs, and users sometimes regard weblogs as important sources of information, in which opinions, news or analysis are collected (Clyde, 2004). Blogs are also created with the purpose of generating a sense of community among online users, allowing different people to connect with each other, interact, and make communal decisions (Packer, 2004).

2.3 Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

According to the literature, the first SNS was launched in 1997 when SixDegrees.com provided an opportunity for users to create a private profile to connect with each other (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). SNSs are defined as “web pages which allow users to create a public profile (Danah & Nicole, 2007), used to communicate with others within certain boundaries or rules (Rohani & Hock, 2009). SNSs are also denoted as “nodes” that bind and connect individuals or organizations for information sharing, likes/dislikes, relationships, common beliefs, knowledge or prestige, and so on. (Abhyankar, 2011). SNSs emerged from the basic concept of Web 2.0, when the new technological and psychological features associated with SNSs merged with older Web 2.0 computer-mediated characteristics (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). Since the beginning of SNSs, millions of users have enjoyed online communications (Statistia, 2017). SNSs like Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Cyworld, WeChat, and Twitter experience an increasing number of users every day (Statistia, 2017). A recent report produced in September 2017 showed that Facebook is the most well-known SNS of all networking sites, according to social media user statistics (Statistia, 2017). Enormous amounts of content are transferred daily through these networking sites (Statistia, 2017). SNSs include features such as public profiles, friends, followers with their comments, home feeds/pages, like or dislike options, groups, and tags. (Murray & Waller, 2007).

Although SixDegrees.com attracted many members by the notion of communicating with each other, the site failed due to its inability to thrive as a sustainable business (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). After the launch of different types of SNS, many websites were released, which eventually caused a revolution in the field of communication. Figure 1 shows the history of SNS evolution, beginning with SixDegree.com in 1997 and spreading in recent years to numerous other SNSs consisting of many users, online communities, and consumers (Boyd & Ellison, 2010).

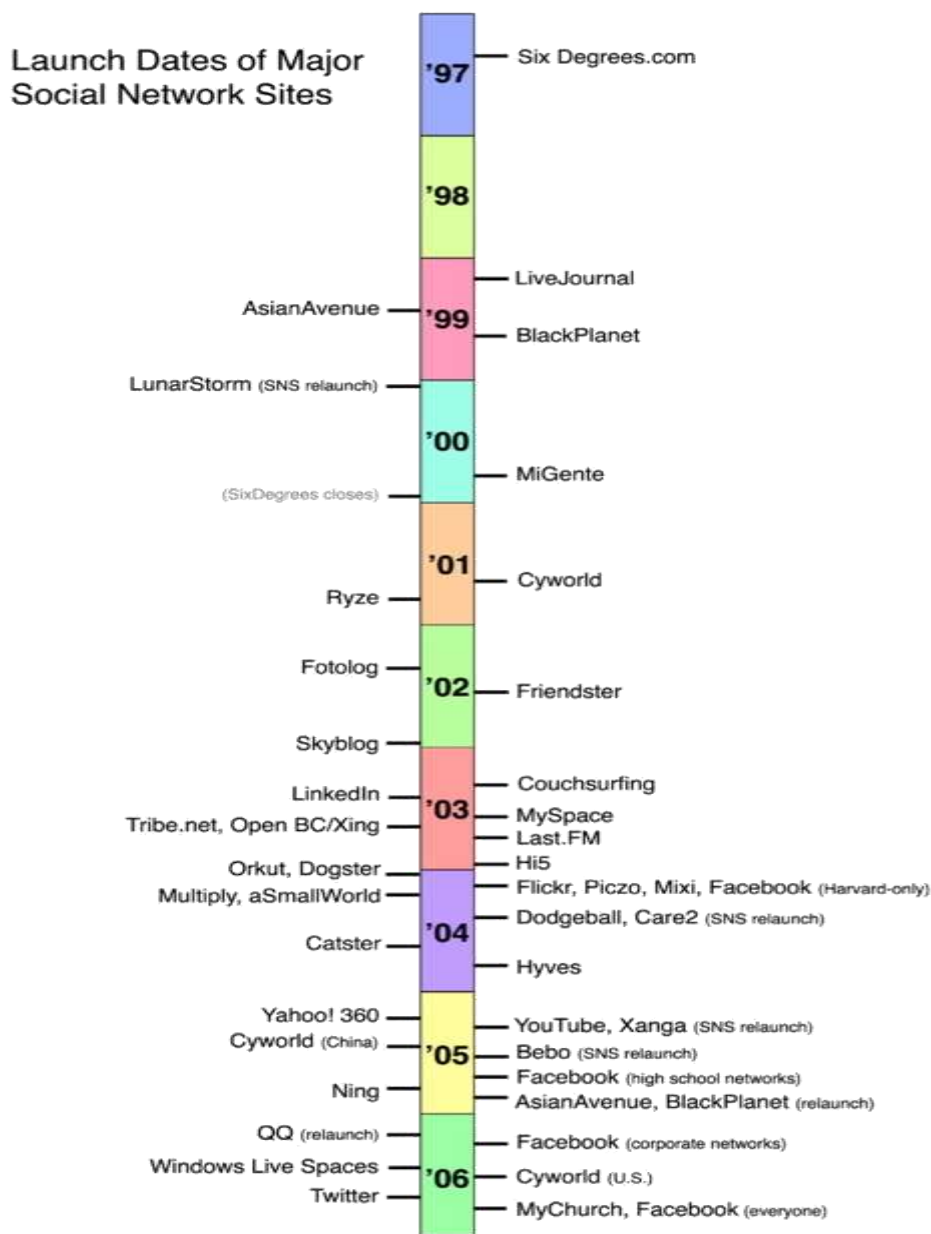


Figure 1 SNSs timeline evolution (Ellison, 2007)

2.3.1 Most Popular Social Networking Sites Worldwide

According to a report published online, the number of currently active users of SNSs has surpassed 173 million (Statistia, 2017). According to Figure 2, Facebook is the leading SNS with over 2,061 million users, compared to other SNS. Facebook creates more online content compared to any other SNS, and provides the opportunity for further research and analysis regarding the uses of SNSs in human communities. The top four SNSs belong to Western countries, while WeChat and QQ belong to the Eastern world (China), which points to global competition among SNS services. Since 1997, many SNSs have come into existence, but few have been able to survive, while many have disappeared or have a very limited number of users (Ellison, 2007).

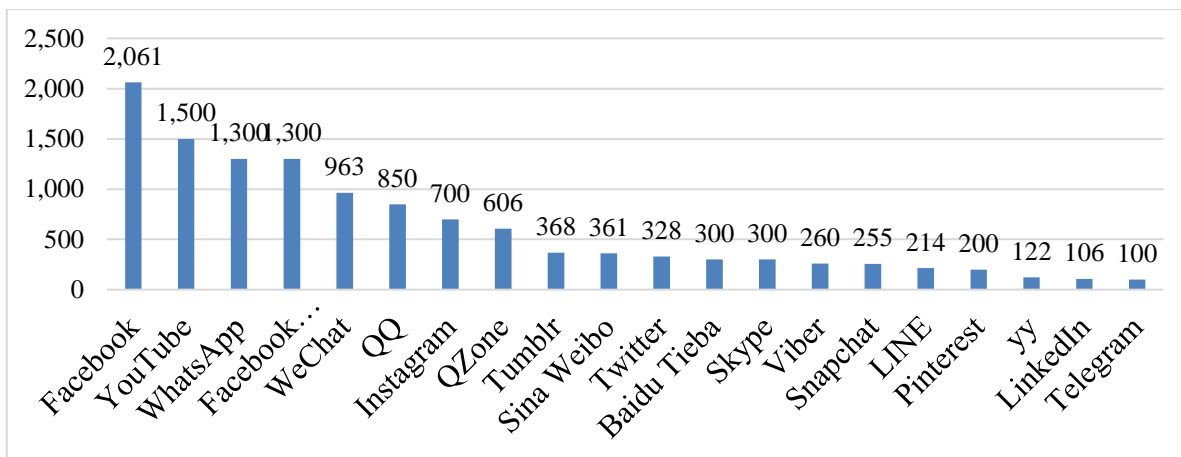


Figure 2 SNS users as of September 2017 in millions (Statistia, 2017)

2.3.2 Number of Active Facebook Users Worldwide

Facebook, the most popular, web-based, social media networking site, was founded by Mark Zuckerberg on February 4, 2004 (Viswanath et al., 2009). Up until now, Facebook has increased its number of users each day. Every year, millions of people join Facebook and become part of an online community. Figure 3 shows the rising number of Facebook users since it was launched in 2004. Facebook beats all other SNSs available in the world. Figure 2 shows that Facebook leads in terms of number of users as compared with other networks.

Leading countries in the world for active YouTube users

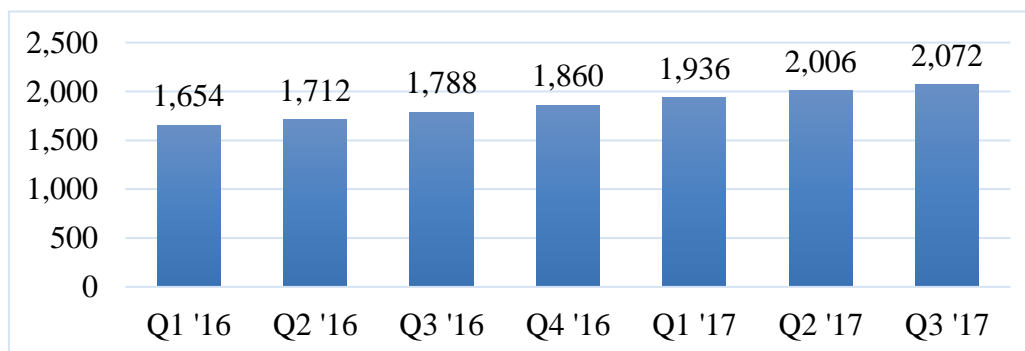


Figure 3 Active Facebook users worldwide (Statistia, 2017)

2.3.3 Leading Countries in the World for Active YouTube Users in 2017

The online available data for SNSs show that the majority of YouTube users live in the US, and that every year the number of YouTube users increases.

2.3.4 Active Users in YouTube for Leading Country of the World

The Figures 4 and 5 show the statistics for YouTube users all over the world, and active users in the US, respectively. As with Facebook, the number of YouTube users has increased every year in both the US and in other parts of the world (Statistia, 2017). It is estimated that the total number of YouTube users will be 187.8 million in 2019 in the US (Statistia, 2017). The increase in users of YouTube indicates that online communities increase every day, and illustrates general consumer behavior toward the use of SNSs. Each year, Google earns millions of dollars just from YouTube through advertisements (Miller, 2010).

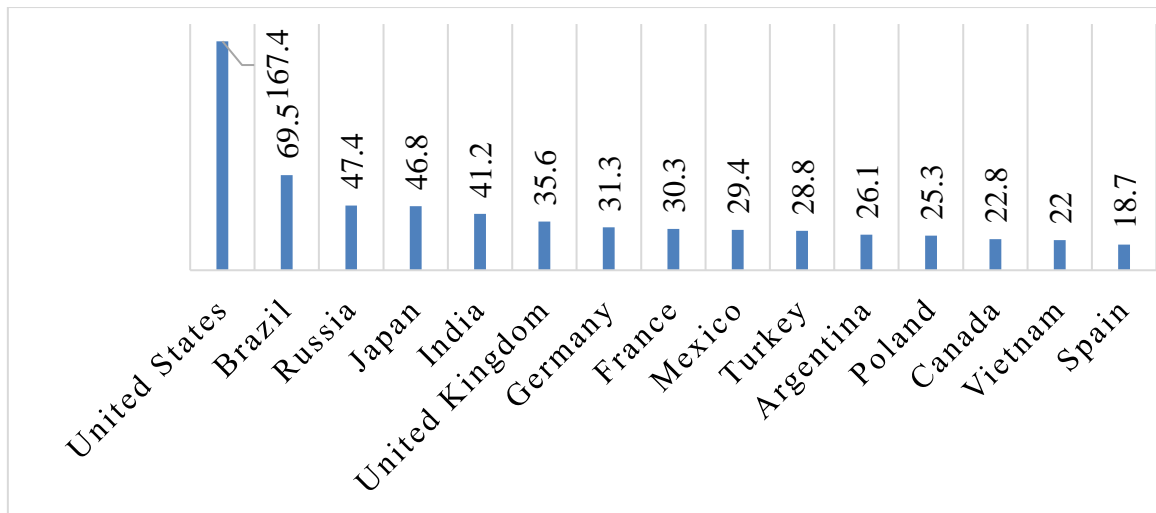


Figure 4 Leading countries in the world for active YouTube users in 2017 (Statistia, 2017)

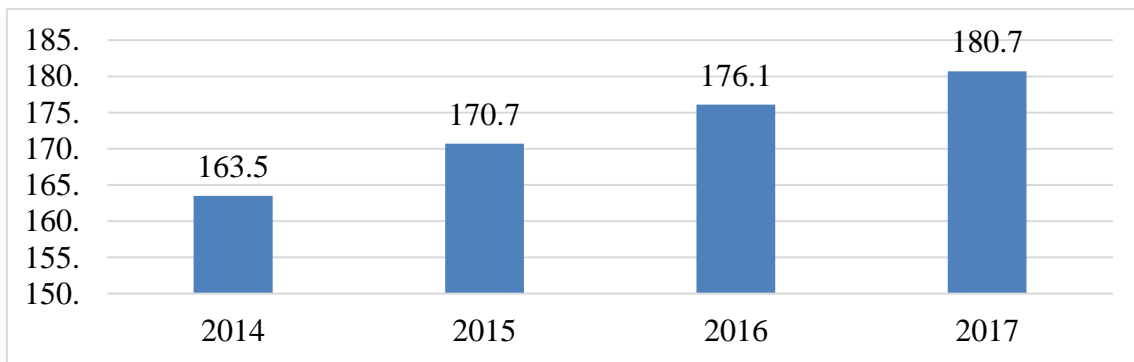


Figure 5 Active YouTube users in the US in millions since 2014 (Statistia, 2017)

In a YouTube site search, there is a lot of online material related to tourism, and users search here for tourism-related information (Reino & Hay, 2016). A study conducted by some researchers indicates that YouTube is the preference of tourists when searching for information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

2.3.5 Active WhatsApp users Worldwide

Figure 6 shows the users of WhatsApp worldwide. In the last quarter of 2017, there were 1,300 million users. All users are registered, and actively connect through WhatsApp to communicate.

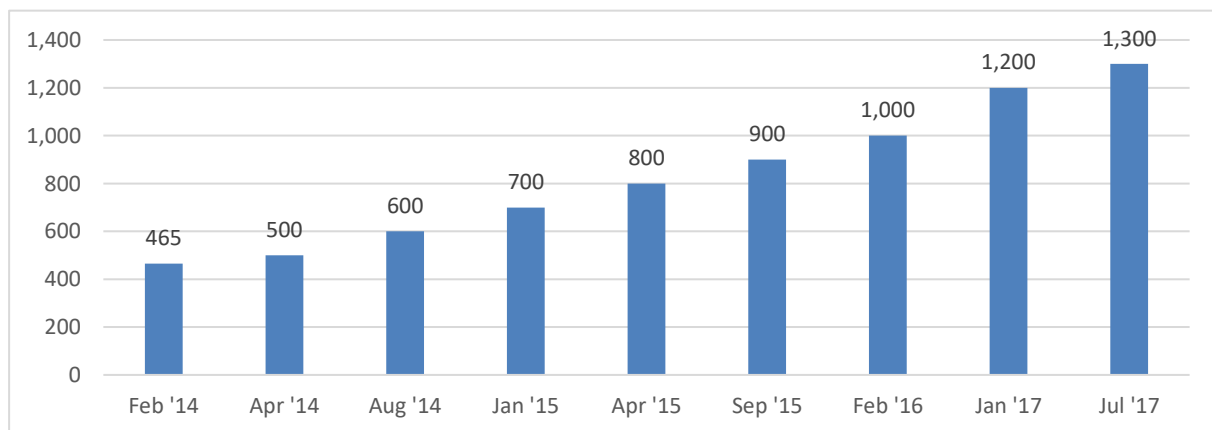


Figure 6 WhatsApp users worldwide in millions since February 2014 (Statistia, 2017)

2.3.6 Active WeChat users Worldwide

Figure 7 shows the number of active users of WeChat. Currently, it is the most used and well-known SNS among the top social media networks in China (China Channel, 2017). Most WeChat users belong to China (eMarketer, 2017). It has also been noted in previous studies that the number of Facebook users is very low in China in comparison to its population (Lien & Cao, 2014).

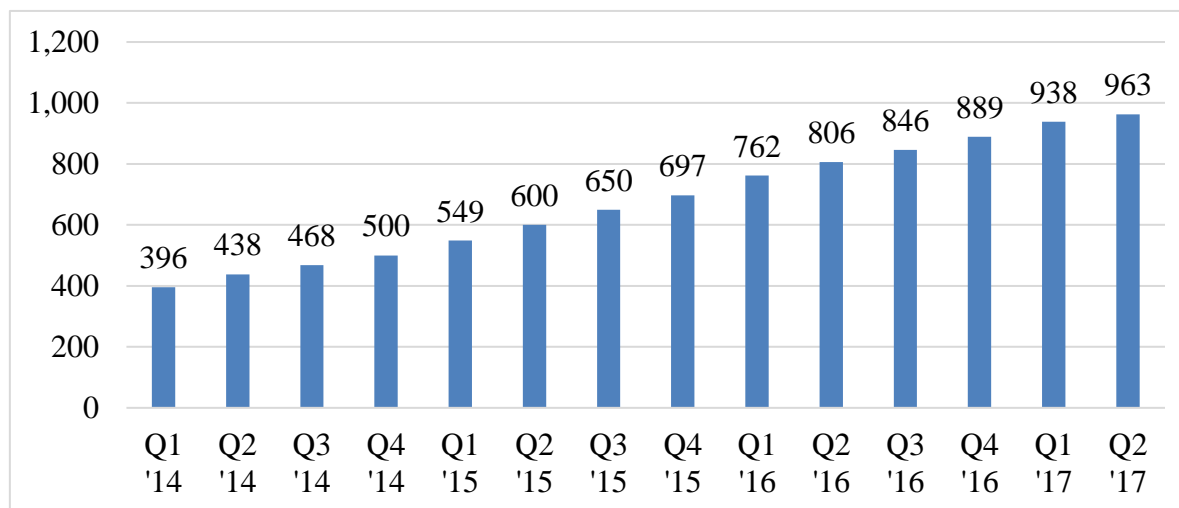


Figure 7 Active WeChat users worldwide (Statistia, 2017)

2.4 Tourism in rural and mountain regions

Much is written about tourism and rural mountain region tourism in the literature (Álvarez-García et al., 2018). This literature review first covers the basic concepts of tourism, that is, definitions of tourism, tourist, and tour. It then discusses the basic concepts of rural and mountain region tourism: the origin of rural and mountain region tourism and its current forms.

The term “tourism” is derived from the concept of travel outside of the existing environment (Davidson, 1998). Tourism may be for pleasure or for business (Nei, 2010). Tourism is the actual practice of touring, including the tourism sector, which provides all facilities, entertainment, and accommodation for the tourists, among other things. (Scott & Lemieux, 2009). Tourism includes national and international sectors, and affects the economies of both the source and host nations (Bonham & Mak, 2014). In addition to the basic principles and definitions, tourism refers to the fleeting movement of the public outside of their environment, with some ambition to get information, entertainment or economic benefit (Chia-Pin Yu et al., 2018; Heeley, 1980).

2.5 Significance of Tourism

Tourism is very significant for economic development, cultural exchange, and civilizations (West, 1993). A tourist doesn’t only look at or visit a place but also contributes to the experience of local community sustainability (Sims, 2009). Tourists often build relationships with local community members, and later these relations may convert to big business deals or other economic terms (Jamal & Getz, 1995). Tourism is an important industry for regions and nations, and for community development (Jianwei Qian et al., 2018; Nei, 2010). Its importance was underlined in the Manila Declaration on World Tourism in 1980 as:

“...an activity essential to the life of nations because of its direct effects on the social, cultural, educational, and economic sectors of national societies and on their international relations” (Declaration, 1980).

Tourism brings many changes to the local economy, creating employment opportunities for locals, and exchange of goods and services, as well (Gaye & Adetunde, 2016).

2.6 Basic Rural Concepts

There are several definitions available to describe countryside/rural regions. Some define the countryside as, “the regions, which exist outside a town or city” (Hall et al., 2006). Some other scholars offer the following definition: “the areas which are not urban are rural” (Goldsmith et al., 1993). Regions in a country that are less developed and have low population density are also included in the rural (Goldsmith et al., 1993). The US census bureau, defines urban areas as, “those areas which have a population density of one thousand people per square mile.” Thus, areas that do not have a population density of one thousand people per square mile can be included in the rural (Kathy, 2017). One main issue with the existing definitions of the rural is that the boundaries, populations, and other characteristics used to define a countryside or rural area are calculated after a long interval of sometimes 10 or more years (Kathy, 2017). Some researchers state that certain places in urban areas are much less developed in character and other features as compared to the rural, but are included in urban areas (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). The most common definition of the countryside is presented by the Oxford Reference: “the land and scenery of a rural area” (Oxford, 2017). Another definition of countryside presented by the Cambridge Dictionary is, “land not in towns, cities, or industrial areas, that is either used for farming or left in its natural condition” (Dictionary, 2017). Besides these basic definitions, every country has its own definition of countryside or rural; these definitions apply only to certain territory, and also differ according to the area of study (Hart et al., 2005).

2.7 Rural Tourism

After the 1990s, rural tourism entered into a new phase (Oliver & Jenkins, 2005). This development gave new directions to rural policy development and new roles for advancement (Hall et al., 2003). Researchers define rural tourism in different ways, with some considering it to be green tourism, ecotourism or farm tourism (Oppermann, 1996). These different concepts of rural tourism also helped to spread tourism and extend its definition (Frochot, 2005). Some other researchers state that the different faces of tourism allow for further specification of the rural world, as well as the development of broad concepts, such as rural world and rural ecosystem (Nguyen Thanh Long & Nguyen, 2018; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997).

With today’s busy lifestyles, rural tourism offers shelter to all kinds of people; human beings search for opportunities to escape their busy lives by spending some time in a place where they can relax and enjoy themselves (Daugstad, 2008).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study population belongs to the Gilgit-Baltistan area of Pakistan. Figure 8 shows the geography of the study population on the map of Pakistan. Gilgit-Baltistan is the most well-known tourism region in Pakistan (U.S. Library of Congress, 2008). Every year, many tourists from all over the world visit this area to enjoy mountain adventures (Imran, 2017). Gilgit-Baltistan borders Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to the west, Azad Kashmir of Pakistan to the south, the Wakhan of Afghanistan to the north, the Tashkurgan (Xinjiang) region of China to the east and northeast, and Kashmir to the southeast (Weightman, 2011).



Figure 8 Map of Pakistan focusing on the study area (U.S. Library of Congress, 2008)

3.1 Overall Sampling Techniques of the Study

The study sample encompasses the eight districts of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan: Gilgit, Skardu, Astore, Diamer, Ghizer, Ghanchi, Hunza, and Nager. A probability cluster sampling method was used to collect the data. The whole province was divided into districts/clusters, and the data was collected accordingly. Figure 9 shows the different districts of Gilgit-Baltistan, which covers an overall area of 72,971km². The population of Gilgit-Baltistan (City Population, 2017) was estimated in 2015 to be 1,800,000. The most famous tours and tourism regions in Gilgit-Baltistan are the valleys of Naltar, Bagrote, Hunza, Ghizer, Kargah, Duikar, Hopar, Passu, and Shigar, among others (Imran, 2017). These areas are the most well known as national and international tourist destinations. Aside from these locations, the whole of Gilgit-Baltistan is naturally gifted with mountainous regions suitable for tours and tourism. Tourists are attracted to these regions by the richness of their natural resources, but they also come for a closer look at the culture and to experience other adventures, such as hunting and climbing (Imran et al., 2014).



Figure 9 Gilgit-Baltistan districts (Imran, 2017)

3.2 Research Background

In the literature, the social media use and activities highlighted by tourists during all stages of rural mountain region tourism are not presented using qualitative methods. Some studies discuss tourist behavior and thematic activities undertaken by tourists in the tour process with reference to one or two steps. Social media has become the number one choice of global consumers for decision-making (Solomon, 2014). The advancement of the internet and availability of different SNSs enable consumers to choose and use media in different ways. Some previous studies disclose that social media is becoming more popular every day with consumers, especially for purposes of tourism, and that it has a positive impact on consumers' lives (Bronner & de Hoog, 2016). The availability of all types of internet services and online information for consumers helps in making numerous decisions (Pan et al., 2007). Likewise, per day of activity, social media has become an important agent in planning a tour (Leung et al., 2013). The availability of internet options facilitates consumer preferences and teamwork (Leung et al., 2013); consumers, like tourists, depend on the suggestions of other experts to make decisions (Leung et al., 2013) and to create a sense of belonging (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social media has now become an agent of change in the minds of consumers (Buhalis & Inversini, 2014). Fotis, along with other researchers, conclude that tourists mainly use social media after a trip they have enjoyed. They also conclude that the second preference of the tourist for using social media is during a tour or trip, at the time of the outing or throughout the tour period (Fotis et al., 2012).

3.3 Justification of the Study Type

In the literature, it was found that most studies focused on the some qualitative aspects of social media in terms of the tour process (planning, pre-trip, trip, and post-trip) (Leung et al., 2013). In the literature, few studies focused on this issue to inform tourists of their behavior when using social media during the whole tour process. In one study, it was found that users wish to use social media in the pre- and post-trip stages of a tour, as well as during the tour itself, because of the trust they place in social media (Burgess et al., 2009). In a second study (Fotis et al., 2012) certain comprehensive details are presented in terms of tourist behavior during a tour but not covered a rural mountain area tourism. Aside from these two studies, there are some minor studies that attempt to explain the use of social media in the tour process but are unable to provide a comprehensive analysis.

3.4 What is New in this Study?

As stated in earlier, there are a few studies that have discussed social media use in the tour process, but none of them are able to present an accepted, trusted way for rural mountain rea tourism. In this study, comprehensive qualitative research was undertaken with a thematic, semi-structured questionnaire.

3.5 Study Methods for Thematic Measurement in the Tourism Process

A qualitative study was conducted to discern tourist behavior in rural mountain region tourism when using social media. A semi-structured questionnaire was used. Justification for the qualitative data collection and other details are presented here. Previous studies recommend a cluster sampling method for this type of qualitative and specific purpose-oriented study (Patton, 2002); therefore, the cluster sampling method was the method used in this study. A semi-structured interview questionnaire was used. The justification for using this type of questionnaire is well presented by Bernard, who states that if the time to meet with respondents is possibly limited to only once, the use of a semi-structured interview is most suitable (Bernard, 2017). The study type may be qualitative, quantitative or based on mixed methods (Cooper et

al., 2006). The quantitative study follows a deductive method of investigation in which a previously presented model is tested, while a qualitative study presents a new method (Zikmund et al., 2013). In this study, the aim was to discern the themes and contents used or faced by tourists during the entire tourism process. This study therefore used a qualitative approach to formulate a new model. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect the data.

3.6 Research Objective

- To discover how social media is used in the entire rural mountain region tour process.
- To discern the most important stage of tour process while tourist using social media.

4. DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS, AND DISCUSSION

For data analysis, the interviews were transformed into codes and then presented in tabular form. The results for each stage are discussed below. Excel was used for coding and sorting, and the main themes were exerted with a tally bar, using frequencies. Table 1 shows the Excel sketch used to tally the main outcomes of the interviews from 124 respondents. The questionnaire was developed in such a way as to cover tourist responses in four stages of the tour process (planning, pre-trip, trip, post-trip). Interesting outcomes were analyzed.

Table 1 Excel Sketch for Tally Bars in the Qualitative Study

Stage No.	Themes	Final codes	Respondent codes																	
			R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12	R13	R14	R15	R16	R17	R18
1	Planning stage	Information Search	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	3	1	1
		Looking at other people's comments about a tour	3	2	3	3	1	1	2	2	3	3	1	3	3	2	1	3	2	2
		Calculating the budget for the trip	2	3	1	1	3	3	1	3	1	1	3	2	2	3	2	1	2	3
2	Pre-trip stage	Finding and collaboration with travel party members	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	3	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	2
		Handling trip departure issues	1	1	1	2	3	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	3	2	1
		Booking tickets and making purchases	3	3	3	3	2	3	1	3	2	1	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	3
3	During the trip stage	self-Expression	1	1	3	3	3	3	1	1	1	1	3	3	1	1	2	2	3	1
		Selecting the best options	4	2	2	2	2	4	1	2	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	3	4	3
		Entertainment	2	3	4	1	1	1	2	2	2	4	1	1	2	2	1	1	3	4
4	Post-trip stage	Keeping in touch with family and friends	3	4	1	4	4	2	2	1	4	2	2	2	4	4	1	1	5	2
		Keeping in touch with travel party members	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	4	2	1	2	4	1	1	2	3
		Evaluating past consumption	2	1	2	4	4	4	1	2	4	1	1	2	3	3	4	4	3	4
		Relating trip adventures	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	2	4	3	1	1	1	2	1	1
		Recall memories	4	4	4	2	2	3	2	3	4	4	3	4	4	2	2	1	3	2

Note: Source, Author

4.1 Tourist Intentions Toward Social Media Use at the Planning Stage

During the planning stage, tourists are motivated to find information and to make other major decisions associated with the tour. Tourists use social media for different purposes at this stage. The main highlighted activities undertaken by tourists at this stage are presented in Table 2.

The results in Table 2 show that tourists intend to use social media in the planning stage to search for information, to look for other people's comments about the tour, and for budget calculations. The results also indicate that the majority of tourists intend to use social media in tourism to search for information (42.3%) during the planning stage of their trip.

Table 2 Tourist Intentions toward Social Media Use at the Planning Stage

Social media use intentions at the planning stage	Tally	%
To search for information on tourist destinations	47	42.3%
Looking at other people's comments about a tour	32	28.8%
To calculate the budget for the trip	32	28.8%
Total	111	100

Note: Source, Author

4.2 Tourist Intentions Toward Social Media Use at the Pre-Trip Stage

The pre-trip stage of a tour is the second stage of the tourist decision-making process for tourism during which tourists who are already motivated to visit a place and make further decisions to confirm the tour. The main activities that tourists undertake in the second stage of travel are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Tourist Intentions toward Social Media Use at the Pre-Trip Stage

Social media use intentions at the pre-trip stage	Tally	%
To find and collaborate with travel party members	36	31.60%
To handle trip departure issues	46	40.40%
To book tickets and make purchases	32	28.10%
Total	114	100

Note: Source, Author

The results in Table 3 show that the main activities of tourists at the pre-trip stage include collaborating with travel companions, handling trip departure issues, booking tickets, and purchasing some goods and services. The focus activity at this stage is handling trip departure issues (40.4%).

4.3 Tourist Intentions Toward Social Media Use During the Trip

In the third stage of tourism, tourists are very busy, and mainly use social media to manage their trips. The following results show the main activities undertaken by tourists during rural mountain region tourism.

Table 4 Tourist Intentions toward Social Media Use during the Trip

Social media use intentions during the trip	Tally	%
For self-expression	43	34.6%
To select the best options	22	17.7%
For entertainment	35	28.2%
To keep in touch with family and friends	24	19.3%
Total	124	100

Note: Source, Author

The results in Table 4 show that the main activities when using social media during the third stage of tourists' journeys include: self-expression, selecting the best options, entertainment, and keeping in touch with family and friends. The results also indicate that the majority of tourists intend to use social media at this stage for self-expression (34.6%).

4.5 Tourist Intentions Toward Social Media Use in the Post-Trip Stage

The fourth stage is the last stage of a trip during which tourists intend to use social media for various activities. In this stage, tourists may have completed their journey but still wish to use social media to recall memories of the trip. The main activities at this stage are listed in Table 5.

Table 5 Tourist Intentions toward Social Media Use in the Post-Trip Stage

Social media use intentions during the post-trip stage	Tally	%
To keep in touch with travel party members	48	38.7%
To evaluate past consumption	21	16.9%
To relate trip adventures	31	25%
To recall memories	24	19.3%
Total	124	100

Note: Source, Author

Table 5 shows social media activities undertaken when tourists finish their trips. The main activities following a tour include: keeping in touch with travel companions, evaluating past consumption, relating trip adventures, and recalling memories. The results also reveal that the majority of tourists wish to keep in touch with their travel companions at the end of their tour through social media (38.7%).

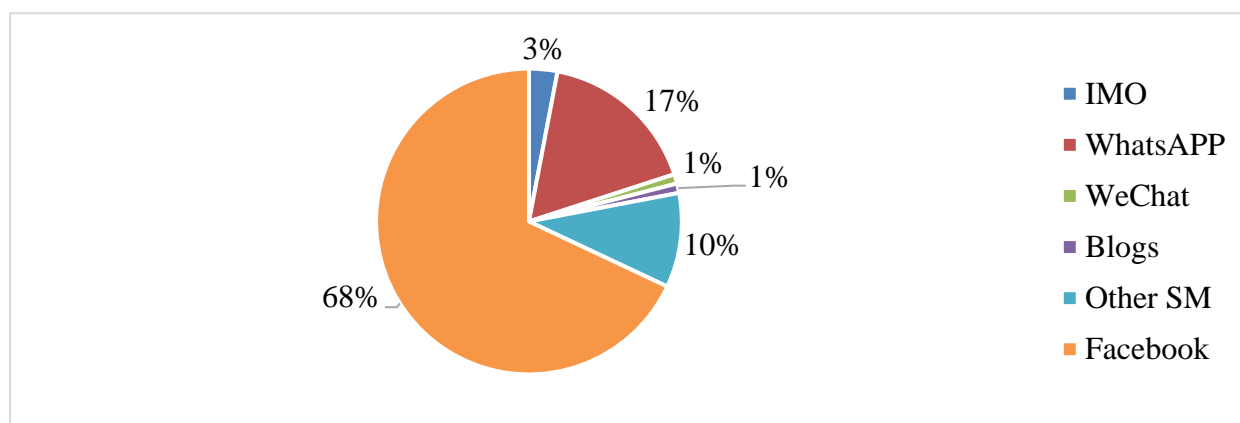


Figure 10 Type of social media used by tourists (Hussain et al., 2018)

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was conducted to discern the main themes and activities undertaken by tourists when using social media during their tour of a rural mountain region. The results show that tourists use social media at all stages of travel for rural mountain region tourism. At the first stage (planning), tourists mainly use social media to search for information. At the second stage (pre-trip), tourists mainly use social media to handle trip affairs. At the third stage (the trip, itself), tourists use social media mainly for self-expression. At the fourth stage, (post-trip), tourists want to use social media to keep in touch with travel companions. In all four stages of the trip, tourists used social media to handle trip affairs while touring rural mountain regions. The researcher attempted to establish the behavior of the tourists, and found that a majority mainly use social media in the planning stage of their rural mountain region trips.

These results also have a link to the existing literature in which some different results were found. In the literature, the researcher found that tourists residing in former Soviet Union republics used social media predominantly during the post-trip stage for sharing experiences

and photos with friends and tour partners (Fotis et al., 2011), while in this study the results showed that only 4.5% of tourists wanted to use social media at the end of their trip. It is recommended that tourism-related agencies, whether they are government or private, should focus on the planning stage of tourism to influence tourist behavior toward sustainable rural mountain region tourism.

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