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ABSTRACT

Contemporarily, social media has become pervasive in tourists' decision-making to travel to any destination. The study assesses the use of social media in travel decision-making of international tourists on Ghana. The study revealed that tourists consider social media platforms as useful for their travel planning. The study also revealed that the social media platform frequently used by the tourists was Facebook with some also using Google map. However, Twitter and TripAdvisor were identified by tourists as rarely used. In conclusion, social media is used and seen useful by international tourists' decision to travel to Ghana. It is recommended that GTA and tourism business should have their businesses visible on these social media platforms to quickly reach tourists who use them.

Introduction

The emergence of Web 2.0, has brought about an apparition of interactive platforms termed "social media". Lange-Faria and Elliot (2012) opined that social media has become the modus operandi and/or method of communication used in the twenty-first century (p. 193), with applications that foster unprecedented growth in human interaction in modern times. These social media platforms are key platforms where users can become members, create a profile, and build a personal network connecting them to other users with whom they share their own content (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube are few examples of social media sites.

The increasing prevalence of social media platforms is one significant development in the evolution of the internet. It enables internet users to collaborate, communicate, and publish original content in the form of blogs, videos, wikis, reviews, or photos (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). According to Leung, Law, and Lee (2011), "social media appears to be a strategic tool that plays an important role in tourism and hospitality management" (p. 18).

Moreover, the past few years have also witnessed remarkable interest in the application of social media to the hospitality and tourism industry. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) noted that social media has become the primary medium by which travel information is shared among travellers. In the same vein, Gretzel, Kang, and Lee (2008) observed that User Generated Content (UGC) such as online travel reviews written by tourists and posted to virtual communities are being used more frequently to communicate and share travel-related information.

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The influence of social media on tourism has attracted the attention of practitioners and researchers in tourism and hospitality. Most studies have looked at the influence of social media on travel planning process (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013a; Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012; Ráthonyi, 2013; Simms, 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010); social media's impact on destination marketing and management (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012); and online travellers' adoption and perceptions of online travel communities and tourism websites (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013b; Leung et al., 2011; Miguéns, Baggio, & Costa, 2008; Millano, Baggio, & Piatelli, 2011; O'Connor, 2010).

However, these studies have largely been done in Western and Asian contexts. Even though social media is not new to scientific studies, most of the empirical studies in tourism and hospitality have been conducted in the setting of the developed world. In Ghana, research has seldom focused on social media, much less on its usage in tourist's travel decision. This calls for additional research to understand social media usage and its usefulness for travel decision-making in under research context like Ghana.

In addition, the target population for previous studies have often been people who use the internet instead of the generality of tourists (e.g. Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013a; Cox et al., 2009; Daugherty, Eastin & Bright, 2008; Leung et al., 2011; Miguéns et al., 2008; Millano et al., 2011; O'Connor, 2010). This raises concerns about the applicability of findings to the general populace. Hence, this study addresses these gaps by examining the types of social media platforms used and their usefulness for travel decision-making by international tourists.

Literature review

Concerning Social Media definition, there exists different and confusing concepts among researchers. However, the two substantive definitions that are dominant in the literature are the ones defined by Brake and Safko (2009) and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). According to Brake and Safko (2009), "social media refers to activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media" (p. 6). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) also defined social media as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of UGC" (p. 61).

Academics in tourism and hospitality such as Cox et al. (2009), Fotis, Buhalis, and Rossides (2011), and Ráthonyi (2013), have noted that the definition by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) is broader and in-depth than the one given by Brake and Safko (2009). For instance, Fotis et al. (2011) explained that the latter describes only a subset of social media which refers to online systems enabling users to become members, create a profile, build a personal network connecting them to other users with whom they exchange on a frequent basis skills, talents, knowledge, preferences, and other information. The researchers further emphasized that social media as a term should not be associated exclusively with social networking sites.

Types of social media

Similarly, just as there is no agreed definition of the terminology "Social Media" in academic literature, so is the categorization of the different kinds of Social Media platforms. It has been postulated in academic literature that there is no systematic way in which different social media applications can be categorized (Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Fotis et al., 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Ráthonyi, 2013). However, some scholars have suggested their taxonomies that explain the categorization of different social media applications (Constantinides, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Fischer & Reuber, 2011).

A major issue of concern among these taxonomies is that there exist similar examples but with different names. Also, among the categories of these taxonomies, there are some major types of social media that are almost prevalent among the different taxonomies. For the purpose of this study, five

major types are proposed and used. They are blogs, collaborative projects, social networking sites, media sharing sites, and content aggregators. In the context of tourism research, most of these types have been used by some researchers in their studies (Cox et al., 2009; Fotis et al., 2012; Lange-Faria & Elliott, 2012; Ráthonyi, 2013).

Blogs are the type of social media which are equivalents of personal web pages and come in a multitude of different variations; from personal diaries describing the author's life to summaries of all relevant information in one specific content area (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 63). Constantinides (2009) opined that blogs are the most known and fastest growing category of Web 2.0 applications. Mangold and Faulds (2009) also identified three major kinds of blogs in their study on social media. These are user-sponsored blogs such as Cnet.com; company-sponsored blogs like Apple.com; and company-sponsored help sites like click2quit.com.

Collaborative projects are websites that enable the joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end-users and are, in this sense, probably the most democratic manifestation of UGC (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 62). The famous online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, Delicious, Digg, Newsvine, Mixx it, Reddit, Merlot, etc. are examples of collaborative projects.

Social networking sites, according to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), are "applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other" (p. 63). Social networking sites include the well-known social networks like Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Faceparty, and Habbo; professional/business networking sites like LinkedIn.

Media sharing sites or content communities are web sites that allow users to organize and share particular types of contents [UGC] (Constantinides, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kim et al., 2010). Examples of media-sharing sites are photo sharing sites like Flickr, Instagram, and Snapchat); video sharing sites like YouTube and Ning; text-sharing sites like BookCrossing and Slideshare; music sharing sites like Jamendo and iTunes; and virtual worlds like Second Life.

Constantinides (2009) explained that content aggregators take two different categories. The first form includes applications that allow users to easily access fully customized, syndicated web content. Examples of this category are uk.my.yahoo.com/, google.com/ig and netvibes.com/. The second category of the content aggregators is web sites gathering material from different sources and creating a new customized product or service. Google Maps are a good example of this type of content aggregators (Table 1).

Table 1. Similarities and differences among the taxonomies of social media.

Types of social media	Constantinides (2009)	Mangold and Faulds (2009)	Kim et al. (2010)	Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)	Fischer and Reuber (2011)
I. Blogs	Blogs	User-sponsored Blogs, Company-sponsored Blogs, Company-sponsored help sites		Blogs	Weblogs
II. Collaborative Projects	Forums/bulletin boards	Collaborative websites, Podcasts, Educational materials sharing, Social bookmarking sites		Collaborative projects	Social bookmarking, User forums
III. Social Networking Sites	Social Networks	Social Networking sites, Invitation-only social networks, Business Networking sites	Social Networking sites	Social Networking sites, Virtual game worlds	Social Networking, Professional Networking, Microblogging
IV. Media Sharing sites	Content communities	Creativity works sharing sites, virtual worlds, news delivery sites	Social media sites	Content communities, Virtual social world	Video-sharing, Picture-sharing
V. Content aggregators	Content aggregators	Commerce communities, Open software			

Social media influence on tourist decision-making

Within the academic literature on social media and tourism, it has often been postulated that consumers' behaviour, in terms of how they plan and consume travel related products, has always been influenced by developments in Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and most especially, social media applications (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013b; Fotis et al., 2012; Leung, Law, Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). Gretzel et al. (2008) further predicted that social media impacts on travel will continue to be tremendous (Fotis et al., 2012; p. 13). In recent years, social media sites have become the method and/ or medium through which contemporary tourists make their travel related purchasing decisions. This is evidenced by the huge impact social media sites have on the way tourists create, search, organize and share tourism experiences (Ráthonyi, 2013).

Most studies have proved that tourists use the internet as a planning resource for their travel (Cox et al., 2009; Fotis et al., 2011; O'Connor, 2010). Travellers utilize social media in three phases of their travel planning process, i.e. pre-trip (influence on destination choice, accommodation choice, and other travel decisions), during trip (find information about specific attractions, stay connected with friends, etc.) and post-trip (share experiences and photos with friends and other travellers, provide evaluation and reviews about destination, accommodation, restaurants, etc.). Howbeit, this study focuses on the social media usage during the pre-trip stage.

The absence of direct experience with a tourism product has long and often been argued as a pertinent issue in tourism and hospitality (Cox et al., 2009; Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Millano et al., 2011). This is because the quality and perceived benefits of tourism and hospitality products can hardly be evaluated before the product is consumed. There is a high risk associated with the purchase of a travel product because it is intangible and experiential. As a result of its experiential nature, it requires extensive information search in order to arrive at a decision (Cox et al., 2009).

According to Ráthonyi (2013), tourists in order to decrease this uncertainty in making travel decisions collect more and more indispensable information in connection with the travel. Social media applications such as TripAdvisor, offer tourists the opportunity to collect and review various forms of travel information early in the travel decision-making process in order to minimize the risk of making wrong decisions. The review of travel-related information on social media sites helps to reduce traveller's uncertainty in their travel decision and stimulate self confidence in the organization of their travel.

Furthermore, most studies have recognized Consumer Generated Media (CGM) or UGC as one of the important external sources of information for travel planning because of its high credibility (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013b; Fotis et al., 2012; Ráthonyi, 2013). For some tourists, a recommendation from an acquaintance or friend has a huge impact on their travel decision-making process. For others, the need to obtain confirmation from other users that they have planned the best trip is crucial (Ráthonyi, 2013). Leung et al. (2013, p. 9) posited that consumers often see themselves in the reviews of others and understand the products based on the perception of their "friends" or fellow consumers.

In addition, available literature on the influence of social media on travel in the tourism and hospitality industry has indicated that social media use as a global phenomenon varies by culture (Cox et al., 2009; Fotis et al., 2012; Gretzel et al., 2008; Ráthonyi, 2013). Cox et al. (2009), Fotis et al. (2012), and Ráthonyi (2013) supported the claim made by Gretzel et al. (2008) that the impact of social media on holiday-related travel planning differs among national tourism markets, with cultural differences contributing to such a difference. Hence, Fotis et al. (2012) alluded that an adequate number of cross-cultural studies of social media influence on tourism are needed to substantiate such a claim (p. 22). It is against this backdrop that this study examines the influence of social media on international tourists' travel decision-making to Ghana.

The hospitality and tourism industry represents one of the major industries being influenced by social media (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013a). It has influenced both travellers' behaviour and the operations of tourism businesses. This is manifested in social media being widely adopted by travellers to search, organize, share, and annotate their travel stories and experiences through blogs and micro blogs such as Blogger and Twitter; online communities like TripAdvisor and RenRen; media sharing sites like Flickr

and YouTube; social bookmarking sites like Delicious, social knowledge sharing sites like Wikitravel; and other tools in a collaborative way (Leung et al., 2013, p. 4).

The travel decision of tourists is a complex one. This is due to the fact that the tourism product is experiential; as a result tourists do not get the chance to have a feel of the product before its purchase. Also, information about such intangible and experiential products cannot be easily determined prior to the purchase. Hence, in order for the tourists to decrease their uncertainty and obtain value for money, they rely on recommendations from other tourists in taking their decision (Fotis et al., 2012). Social media platforms serve as fertile grounds for the generation of such information. Tourists live their experiences and recommendations on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TripAdvisor. These reviews then become a pool of information that influence other tourists' travel planning. For instance, a study by Cox et al. (2009) disclosed that tourists who had consulted an online review of tourism product were more likely to purchase the product than those who did not.

In short, social media applications exert influence on tourists' behaviour; most especially, providing tourists with a pool of travel information and contents from other users to aid their travel planning and decision. Again, they provide information with access beyond the boundaries of one's immediate social circle; enabling the acquisition of more extensive information from internet users around the world (Leung et al., 2013, p. 8). However, it has been found that tourists' propensity to use social media or CGM on social media platforms is determined by several characteristics of the CGM and some socio-demographic characteristics of the tourists like sex and age (Cox et al., 2009; Fotis et al., 2012; Ráthonyi, 2013).

Methodology

The study was conducted in the Central Region of Ghana. Specifically Cape Coast, Elmina, and Abrafo towns were used as the areas for the study. This is because these three towns house the three most prominent attractions in Ghana; namely, Cape Coast Castle, Elmina Castle, and Kakum National Park respectively. Statistics from Ghana Tourism Authority suggest that, the Central Region of Ghana receives the highest number of attractions and tourists in Ghana (Ghana Tourism Authority, 2016). The major reason for the popularity of the Region as a tourist destination is the United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Sites, namely; Cape Coast Castle, Elmina Castle, and Fort St. Jago as well as the Kakum National Park with its unique canopy walkway. Data for the study were collected at these three popular attractions in the Central Region, namely; Cape Coast Castle, Elmina Castle, and Kakum National Park. These three attractions receive the highest number of international tourists in the Central Region of Ghana (Ghana Tourism Authority, 2016).

The specific objective of this study is to identify the types of social media used by international tourists visiting Ghana. In addition, the study sought to examine the perceived usefulness of social media to international tourists visiting Ghana. This study was grounded in the positivist paradigm of research. The positivists believe that reality is stable and can be observed and described from an objective point without interfering with the phenomenon being studied (Sarantakos, 2005). Drawing on this, a quantitative method of data collection and analysis was adopted for the study.

The study adopts a non-experimental research design. This is because tourists who travel to Ghana would have already made their travel decisions, and hence will not allow for any manipulation of the key variables. Specifically, the study adopts cross-sectional survey design. A cross-sectional survey design, with respect to this study, is concerned with the types of social media platforms used by international tourists, and usefulness that international tourists hold on social media sites regarding their travel decision to Ghana. This study started from the beginning of the year 2015. Howbeit, the actual field work took place from February 2016.

In all, 200 questionnaires were administered through the convenience sampling technique at the three selected attractions. Among the respondents, 196 were found to be useful for analysis. The data were coded and entered into the Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS) version 21 software for analysis. The data were carefully edited (cleaned) to remove all outliers or extreme values which

could affect the validity of the results. It was analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent sample *t*-test, and ANOVA.

Results

Table 2 provides a summary of the socio-demographic characteristics of international tourists to the Cape Coast-Elmina-Abrafo area. The gender distribution of respondents was 60.7% females and 39.3% males, showing that more females participated in the study than their male counterparts. Furthermore, majority of the tourists (71.4%) were unmarried whereas 28.6% of them were married. With regard to the age of international tourists, respondents aged between 20 and 29 (39.8%) dominated, which is followed by those aged less than 20 (26.5%). Tourists within the 30–39 age group appeared to be the least (15.8%) among the age groupings after the over 40 age group which represented 17.9%. On the whole, the average age of international tourists was 29 years.

In general, all international tourists had attained some level of formal education. Table 2 shows that, 37.2% of the respondents had attained post-graduate degrees, 34.7% had attained tertiary degrees, and about 28.1% had Senior High School qualifications. Table 2 further indicates that 53.8% of the respondents had an average monthly income of more than US$900.00, whereas 8.2% had average monthly incomes ranging between US$600.00, and US$899.00. Also, 18.4% had an average monthly income less than US$300, whereas 13.3% had an average monthly income ranging between US$300.00 and US$599.00.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of international tourists.

Background characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	77	39.3
Female	119	60.7
Total	196	100.0
Marital status		
Married	56	28.6
Unmarried	140	71.4
Total	196	100.0
Age		
<20	52	26.5
20–29	78	39.8
30–39	31	15.8
40+	35	17.9
Total	196	100.0
Highest level of education		
High School	55	28.1
Tertiary	68	34.7
Post Graduate	73	37.2
Total	196	100.0
Average Monthly Income (US $)		
<300	36	21.3
300–599	26	15.4
600–899	16	9.5
>900	91	53.8
Total	169	100

Types of social media used by tourists

This section investigated the types of social media that international tourists to Ghana use. Studies have shown that social media has become the modus operandi of this generation and its use is not spatially bound (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012). Hence, tourists use social media everywhere they are, given that there is internet at their destination.

From Table 3, majority 92.3% (181 of 196) of the respondents indicated that the most used social media type was Facebook, with 83.2% (163 of 196) using content aggregators, notably Google maps. Also, media sharing sites 79.1% (155 of 196) such as Youtube and Flickr followed as social media used by respondents. Another interesting finding emerging is the use of collaborative projects such as Wikipedia. It accounted for 78.1% (153 of 196) of the respondents.

Furthermore, 65.3% (128 of 196) of the responses also indicated that they used TripAdvisor, whereas 55.1% (108 of 196) also used blogs. The least among the types of social media used is Twitter which accounted for just 32.1% (63 of 196) of the responses.

Table 3. Social media types used by tourists.

Social media type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Facebook	181	19.0
Blogs	108	11.4
TripAdvisor	128	13.5
Collaborative Projects	153	16.1
Twitter	63	6.6
Media Sharing Sites(e.g. Youtube, Flickr)	155	16.3
Content aggregators (e.g. Google maps)	163	17.1
Total	951*	100.0

[*]Multiple responses.

Frequency of use

Tourists were also asked to indicate their frequency of use of the different types of social media. On the whole Facebook was the most used social media type and the least used social media type was TripAdvisor. Specifically, majority of Facebook users (85.7%) use it daily, whereas 4.4% of the respondents use it rarely. Again, media sharing sites such as Youtube, Flickr, and SnapChat were the most frequently used social media sites after Facebook. Over half (60%) of the users of media sharing sites use those sites daily.

Content aggregators such as Google maps, were the next most frequently used social media type with 42.9% of its users using it every day. Respondents rarely used blogs, with once a week and rare being at par, recording 37.0%. About a quarter of blog users (25.9%) use it daily. Majority of Collaborative projects users (63.4%) use it rarely, whereas 36.6% use it every day. TripAdvisor is the least used social media by tourists with 89% of its users using it rarely (Table 4).

Table 4. Frequency of use.

Social media type	Several times daily	Once a day	Once a Week	Rare	Total
Facebook	48.1	37.6	9.9	4.4	100.0
Blogs	4.6	21.3	37.0	37.0	100.0
TripAdvisor	4.7	6.3	19.5	69.5	100.0
Collaborative Projects	8.5	28.1	43.8	19.6	100.0
Twitter	11.1	28.6	19.0	41.3	100.0
Media Sharing Sites(e.g. Youtube, Flickr)	22.6	37.4	29.7	10.3	100.0
Content aggregators (e.g. Google maps)	10.4	32.5	32.5	24.5	100.0

Usefulness of social media to tourists

Table 5 presents the basic issues taken into consideration in measuring usefulness of social media to tourists using frequency distribution of responses to each statement, percentage in agreement and standard deviations. On the whole, tourists strongly agreed (mean = 2.88) to issues pertaining to usefulness of social media for travel decision-making.

Table 5. Usefulness of social media to tourists.

Social media	N	% that agree	M	SD
Improve my travel planning	196	71.9	2.82	.76
Help me plan trips more efficiently	196	73.0	2.89	.78
Make travel planning easier	196	75.6	2.94	.77
Make travel related decision easier	196	74.0	2.87	.75
Overall score	*196*	*73.6*	*2.88*	*.77*

Source: Scale: 1–1.49 = Strongly Disagree; 1.5–1.99 = Disagree; 2–2.49 = Agree; 2.5–3 = Strongly Agree.

Specifically, tourists strongly agreed (mean = 2.82) that the use of social media improves their travel planning. Furthermore, tourists strongly agreed (mean = 2.89) that social media helps them plan their trips more efficiently. Also there was a strong agreement (mean = 2.94) by tourists that the use of social media makes tourists' travel planning easier. In terms of arriving at a travel decision, respondents strongly agreed (mean = 2.87) that social media is useful in making travel-related decisions easier.

Background characteristics by perceived usefulness of social media

This section explores the variations in perceptions of usefulness across the background characteristics of international tourists in Ghana. The background characteristics considered include sex, age, income, and educational qualification. Specifically, the T-test and the one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. The T-test was used where the background characteristics which served as the independent variable were in only two categories (in this case sex). On the other hand, the one way ANOVA was used where the background characteristics were in more than two categories. The Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) method, one of the common *post hoc* procedures, was used to identify which comparisons among various background characteristics had significant differences. The results of the tests are presented in Table 4.

With respect to sex, the T-test analysis revealed that there were significant differences in tourists' perceived usefulness of social media sites ($p < .01$). Though both males and females strongly agreed that social media was useful to them for travel planning, there were significant variations in their responses. From Table 4, it is evident that females agreed more that social media was useful (mean = 2.93) in terms of their travel planning than males (mean = 2.65).

Also, the one way ANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences between tourists' age and their perceived usefulness of social media ($p = .33$). However, all the age groups strongly agreed that social media was useful to them; less than 20 (mean = 2.75), 20–29 (mean = 2.92), 30–39 (mean = 2.77), and more than 40 (mean = 2.73).

There were no significant differences in the role played by tourists' income ($p = .95$) in determining social media usefulness to tourists. However, all income earners from the range of less than US$300 to more than US$900.00 a month strongly agreed that social media was useful for travel planning (means = 2.86; 2.86; 2.76; 2.83) respectively.

Again, the one way ANOVA showed that there were no significant differences between tourists' educational background and their perceived usefulness of social media ($p = .88$). Nonetheless, tourists with high school certificates strongly agreed (mean = 2.81) that social media was useful for travel planning. Similarly, tourists with first degree (mean = 2.79) and postgraduates (mean = 2.85) also strongly agreed (Table 6).

Table 6. Background characteristics by perceived usefulness of social media.

Sex	N	Mean	p-value
Male	77	2.65*	.00*
Female	119	2.93*	
		t = 2.95	
Age			
<20	52	2.75	.33
20–29	78	2.92	
30–39	31	2.77	
>40	35	2.73	
		F = 1.14	
Income (US$)			
<300	36	2.86	.95
300–599	26	2.86	
600–899	16	2.76	
>900	91	2.83	
		F = .11	
Educational			
High School	55	2.81	.88
Tertiary	68	2.79	
Post-graduate	73	2.85	
		F = .12	

Notes: Scale: 1–1.49 = Strongly Disagree; 1.5–1.99 = Disagree; 2–2.49 = Agree; 2.5–3 = Strongly Agree.
*$p < .01$.

Conclusion and implications

Facebook was seen in the study as the most used social media type by tourist visiting Ghana along with media sharing sites. This supports Brake and Safko's (2009) assertion that social networking sites (Facebook) and media sharing sites are predominantly used for connecting with friends, sharing posts, images, and videos. Again, these sites were seen to be used frequently by tourists. This could be attributed to the fact that social networking sites and media sharing sites are fun sites where users interact through messaging and sharing of images and videos (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Another interesting finding from this study is that tourists admitted to using content aggregators (e.g. Google maps) frequently. This confirms that most tourists use content aggregators such as Google maps to find their routes and locations at the destinations they visit. TripAdvisor was the least used social media type before Blogs and Twitter. It was also the rarely used social media type. This could be attributed to the fact that TripAdvisor is mainly for tourists/travellers and hence, they visit the site only when they need travel information from the site (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013a).

Social media been useful for travel decision by tourists could be attributed to the fact that some social media platforms act as repositions of information. For instance, Wikipedia serves as a "home" for in-depth information on places, attractions, and restaurants. Thus, it enables tourists to efficiently plan their trips with the availability of rich and adequate information. Likewise, some social media platforms like TripAdvisor, Facebook, and Blogs allow tourists to see and read the reviews of other tourists who have actually experienced tourist products and services at the destination in which the tourists want to go. This supports Ayeh, Au & Law, (2013b) claim that for prospective tourists, the usefulness of CGM is related to the extent to which CGM helps them in their travel planning.

Tourists agreed that social media assisted them to arrive at travel-related decisions in terms of accommodations and transportation. This can be explained by the fact that most tourism facilities and services have pages on social media platforms (Ráthonyi, 2013). These pages also have links to their various websites. For instance, TripAdvisor, which has lists of various hotels and airlines around the world.

The T-test analysis revealed that there were significant differences in tourists' perceived usefulness of social media sites. This finding confirms Nunkoo, Juhaweer, and Rambhunjun's (2013) assertion that females consider social media more useful than males. Several studies have also proven that females

use social media than males (Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Gretzel et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2010). Hence, it can be concluded that perceived usefulness positively influences tourists' use of social media for travel decision-making. This affirms the assumption by researchers that, perceived usefulness of social media influences its use for travel decision-making (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013a; Nunkoo et al., 2013).

This study revealed that Facebook and content aggregators (Google maps) are the most used social media types. Hence, it is recommended that Ghana Tourism Authority and tourism businesses should create profiles of their establishments on Facebook in order to reach the tourists who use Facebook. This will serve as a source of free marketing and advertising platform for these businesses. They can then post their products and services on their Facebook page and address reviews posted by customers online. In the same vein, these stakeholders should ensure that their businesses are easily traceable and accessible using the Google map application in the country.

Again, it was evident in the study that although tourists use TripAdvisor, they use it rarely. This is because they use it for only travel purposes. Hence, tourism and hospitality businesses should focus attention on ensuring that their businesses and attractions are visible on TripAdvisor. Also, these stakeholders should also pay attention to reviews and posts about their facilities on TripAdvisor. They should track these posts and react to any negative reviews about their businesses whiles recommending their facility for potential tourists via the positive reviews.

Penultimately, this study has revealed that tourists consider social media as useful. Hence, tourism business should accept this fact and incorporate social media into their business activities to ensure their visibility to tourists. Therefore, tourism businesses should understand that social media is now pervasive among tourists. These businesses should adopt sites such as TripAdvisor, which allows users to make travel purchases and arrangements.

A major limitation to the study is that the sample size is small. Therefore, the results might not reflect the market as a whole and may not be applicable to all tourists visiting Ghana. Again, this study could have taken into consideration issues relating to social media influence on the pre-travel, during the travel and post-travel decisions of international tourists in other parts of Ghana. On the other hand, it only focused on the usage of social media at the pre-travel stage. Also, the study is limited to some locations in the country as far as the study of social media role on international tourists' travel decision to Ghana is concerned.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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