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Papers

Social network influences on young tourists: An exploratory analysis of determinants of the purchasing intention

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Abstract

Several studies have identified the key determinants of customers' intentions to purchase online, as well as the impact of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication on their judgements. Despite the large volume of contributions to this topic, there is a lack of research on the impact of social networks specifically on young consumers' behaviour, despite their extensive use of social networks and greater exposure to social network-mediated advertising. The aim of this paper is to explain the antecedents of the purchasing intention for a tourism product in the context of social network communication, involving research among a sample of 1,183 students. Findings show the significant influence of eWOM communication and enjoyment, in addition to standard variables of the technology acceptance model (such as ease of use and usefulness), on attitude and intention. Key results of this work concern the importance of Facebook-mediated messages for the choice of tourism packages, with consequences for marketing strategies in the tourism industry.

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Social networks as a new opportunity for marketers

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Introduction

Increasing improvements in web-based technologies, as well as ubiquitous internet access to information, have forced the tourism industry to outline new frameworks for responding to new market challenges and enhancing their position in a highly competitive sector.^{1–3} In fact, social networks represent a new opportunity for marketers by providing a free platform that allows consumers to use the social environment for obtaining information useful in the decision-making process.^{1,4}

Due to the widespread diffusion of internet access for a large number of individuals, the emergence of social network analysis has coincided with an explosion in popular interest in this social channel. These systems represent a social structure characterized by individuals involved in specific types of interdependency through: (a) profile

creation; (b) identification of a list of other users with whom to develop a connection (ie friendship); and (c) visualization of the list of connections of other users within the system.^{1,5} As a consequence, social networks represent a rich and attractive source of information for a large part of the population.⁵

For this reason, organizations can use social networks for communicating directly with clients and providing messages concerning brand, products and advertising,⁶ as well as for sourcing data on trends and interacting with suppliers and employees.⁷ In fact, consumers' shared opinions and experiences, posted suggestions and reviews represent a relevant typology of user-generated content for both clients and marketers.⁸ Furthermore, the promotion of brands and products through social networks is less expensive for marketers if compared with traditional media such as television, but at the same time is very efficient for enhancing consumer loyalty towards the firm, and influencing purchasing intention, awareness, attitude and judgements.⁶

Extensive use of Facebook among youth

In this scenario, the popular social networking system Facebook is emerging as the new powerful tool for social and marketing communication,⁹ with more than 800 million active users.¹⁰ This social network is a free virtual space where users can share opinions and make suggestions through several user-friendly tools that support keeping in touch with friends in a fast and easy way. Moreover, it is one of the most popular social networks among young people.^{11–14} Students especially make extensive use of Facebook for: (a) maintaining existing relationships; (b) meeting new people; (c) having fun; (d) making themselves more popular; (e) passing time; (f) expressing themselves; (g) supporting learning; (h) managing materials (eg photos, friends' contact info, etc); and (i) student activism (eg student election campaigns, participation in student groups, etc).^{13,15}

Despite increasing attention towards Facebook, research into this social medium has mainly been devoted to aspects such as privacy and psychological traits (eg identity presentation).^{12,16,17} In fact, only a limited number of current studies have focused on young travellers' behaviours.⁹ Since young people are more likely to use Facebook and social networks for news-related purposes compared with older people¹⁸ — and given their increasing likelihood of buying travel products (especially due to the high availability of low-cost flight connections and accommodation for youth) — this study focuses on usage by youth of the social medium and its influence on the choice of tourism destinations. This group has achieved large exposure in current literature due to its attitude towards travelling and adopting new technologies. In fact, the emergence of organizations devoted to supporting young tourists in travelling and planning vacations (eg World Youth Student & Educational Travel Confederation, Federation of International Youth Travel Organisations, etc) highlights the increasing power of youth in the tourism sector and the need for new strategies to support the global industry in reaching this particular target audience.

Focus on Facebook's influence on purchasing

Despite this increasing interest, research on the relationship between social network usage and young consumers' behaviour is still in progress. For this reason, our study focuses on the young part of the population and its interest in social networks, with particular emphasis on Facebook. In particular, the aim of this paper is to explain the antecedents of purchasing intention of a tourism product and to highlight the opportunities and challenges for the sector.

The first part of this paper analyses the existing research into the influence of perceived enjoyment and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication on tourists' purchasing intention, whereas the second part is devoted to a quantitative analysis that involves research among 1,183 young, experienced social network users in order to predict their intention to use the social network as a supporting tool for purchasing a tourism product. We based our model on the technology acceptance model (TAM),¹⁹ which we tested through the structural equation model (SEM) and LISREL software to evaluate the covariance-based SEM.

Key results of this work concern the importance of Facebook-mediated messages for the choice of tourism destination and the consequences of this for tourism industry marketing strategies. We also synthesize findings from several fields, such as computer science, psychology, marketing and social sciences.

Social network usage for tourism purposes

Theoretical background

The increasing adoption of social networks, as well as the increasing number of young tourists, has forced the tourism industry to reconsider the way it communicates and delivers tourism products and services. In fact, through the online social channel, the way people plan for, buy and consume tourism products and services has dramatically changed the role of tourism intermediaries.^{20,21} Tourists post their thoughts and opinions about past holidays and experiences, and make them available to the global community of internet users, who can access this information without traditional intermediaries such as tour operators and travel agencies. As a consequence, there are new opportunities for marketers to use social networks for tourism purposes. On the one hand, social networks become new intermediaries between the tourism industry and potential tourists by overcoming the traditional role of tour operators and travel agencies, providing tourists with information to support their choice and reduce the risk involved.²⁰ On the other, social networks increase the productivity and efficiency of hotels' marketers, by allowing hospitality companies to reach their customers directly and offer them customized promotions and products.²²

In fact, social networks play an important role in information diffusion among tourists, which is capable of influencing their behavioural intentions,^{22,23} as well as their subsequent decision-making process related to the possible tourism product. This product can consist of a tourism package, a flight ticket, a hotel booking, excursions and other features concerning a future destination. In particular, communication mediated by social networks affects the complex decision-making process by affecting: (a) need identification; (b) pre-decision making;

(c) identification of possible products/services to satisfy the need; (d) evaluation of alternatives; and (e) effective choice.²⁴ Furthermore, previous studies identified the influence of social networks on the purchase of goods⁴ by finding correlations between the use of these systems and the purchasing decision. Since it is often intangible factors that characterize the tourism product, the influence of social networks and eWOM communication could affect the decision-making process differently.

Online influences on young travellers

To date, a large number of consumers have consulted and taken into account web-based information and user-generated content in order to have more elements for reducing the cognitive effort and making a more accurate choice. Thus, their judgements on the product and the subsequent choice are affected by the set of consulted reviews,⁸ as well as by advice and recommendations of other consumers.²⁵

Hence, the online channel represents an effective informative source for supporting tourists in planning a future vacation, able to influence the perception of the final destination.^{22,26} For instance, recent work focused on the attention students paid to recommendations in online groups and communities.⁹ For this reason, destination marketing organizations and hotel and tourism operators are forced to understand how to exploit traveller-generated content to achieve a competitive advantage and positively influence their tourism flows.²⁶

Social networks, especially Facebook, support knowledge-sharing among users and become a useful free space where they can find fast and current information on destinations and tourism products. Since hospitality and tourism offer intangible goods that cannot be evaluated before actual consumption, the influence of other people plays an important role in behavioural intentions.^{27–29}

Perceived usefulness, ease of use, attitude and behavioural intention

Past studies on the acceptance of a certain technology for a certain usage mainly focused on the TAM,^{4,19} by indicating the role, perceived usefulness and ease of use of a technology in influencing a user's attitude and behavioural intention towards the specific technology.

Hence, the use of user-generated content available online for travelling purposes can be affected by its perceived usefulness by tourists, as indicated by Davis¹⁹ in TAM, which states that the perceived usefulness represents the degree to which a person believes that using that technology would improve his/her performance. As a consequence, the usefulness of the system cues a positive relationship between its usage and the user's performance. Perceived usefulness is the subjective probability that the usage of a certain technology will improve the way the user completes the given task. On the basis of theories in social psychology,^{30,31} perceived usefulness is the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance. According to Davis,¹⁹ perceived usefulness refers to users' perceptions regarding the outcome of the experience. Similarly, Mathwick *et al.*³² defined perceived usefulness as the extent to which a person deems a particular system capable of boosting his or her job performance.

Accessing online content seen to provide benefits

There is extensive evidence proving the significance of effect of perceived usefulness on behavioural intention.^{4,19,33,34} In fact, perceived usefulness is also an important factor in determining the adoption of

innovations. In this study, the perceived usefulness of traveller-generated content may be defined as the degree to which a tourist believes that accessing online information will provide certain benefits in the choice of a tourism destination. Access to this information emerges from the interaction among tourists, knowledge sharing and recommendations online.

Moreover, perceived ease of use is a key antecedent of consumers' adoption of a web-based technology.³⁵ Past studies also argued that perceived ease of use is the extent to which a person accepts as true that using this method would be at no cost to that individual.^{4,19} Similarly, Zeithaml *et al.*³⁶ stated that the degree to which an innovation is easy to understand or use could be considered as perceived ease of use, whereas Consult³⁷ noted that perceived ease of use refers to the ability of consumers to experiment with a new innovation and evaluate its benefits easily. Hence, the drivers of growth in electronic commerce are determined by the perceived ease of use, which is a combination of convenience provided, easy internet access, private and secure transactions, high standard of functionality and a large number of services.³⁷

Extensive research provides evidence of the significant effect of perceived ease of use on usage intention, either directly or indirectly.^{33,34,38-41} In fact, the amount of time consumed and mental effort involved in an online interaction may deter consumers' intention to use a certain technology.³⁵

eWOM communication

Although social networks may not be considered news providers, their ubiquity and capacity to reach directly individual users supports the transmission of information, creating new opportunities for content providers. Social networks such as Facebook enable interpersonal communication among users due to their characteristics of low cost, high reliability and ease of use for transmitting information.⁴ In this way, social networks support eWOM communication among consumers through sharing knowledge concerning products and services,²⁹ with positive consequences for traveller behaviour.²⁷

Since this communication is many-to-many and the level of interactivity is high, social networks involve more actors in knowledge creation and sharing about a certain topic (a product, a destination, a hotel, etc). As a consequence, the shared knowledge reduces the risk involved in the decision-making process of intangible goods such as tourism products.²⁹ Hence, eWOM contributes to increasing the reputation and trust of a firm, organization, destination, hotel and so on,⁴² as well as to its popularity among consumers.²⁸ In fact, previous studies demonstrated that recommendations promoted by consumers through online reviews are more efficient than similar ones promoted by a representative of the organization itself.²⁸

Thus, eWOM extends users' choices for gathering information about products and services from others. In fact, electronic environments serve as an innovative venue for gathering reliable and detailed information on products and services from a vast, geographically dispersed experienced group of people, overcoming frequent information asymmetries that characterize traditional consumer markets.⁴ They are directed at multiple

eWOM positively influences behaviour

individuals (or at groups of individuals), are anonymous and are available at any time.²⁷

Because of such significance and the popularity of eWOM communication, studies in the last few years have actively examined the effect of eWOM on consumer behaviour.⁴³ To investigate the specifics of eWOM behaviour, researchers studying online consumer psychology have focused on how eWOM influences the consumer decision-making process. In fact, this communication modality is considered as having a great persuasiveness through higher perceived credibility and trustworthiness.⁴⁴ For example, Sun *et al.*⁴⁵ found that eWOM was positively related to consumer behaviour due to its role in the flow of knowledge from consumer to consumer.

In the tourism sector, there is an increasing number of online traveller communities (eg TripAdvisor.com)⁴⁶ and web sites that provide the function of online booking and which are used to solicit travellers' reviews of hotels and destinations (eg booking.com).²⁴ A web site with more reviews is more attractive for consumers.²⁸ Many tourists consult online reviews before choosing a hotel, and these might play an important role, especially for lesser known brand hotels.⁴ In fact, there is an effective causal relationship between online tourists' reviews and online hotel room sales.²⁴ In particular, a tourist review reduces both the cognitive load and the risk employed during the decision-making process, supporting a traveller to make a better choice.^{4,9,22}

In this scenario, the impact of eWOM on tourist decision making is important, especially in the hospitality industry. When tourists articulate comments and review on a social network, inexperienced tourists gain an opportunity to enhance their understanding of tangible factors and to reduce their risk in terms of intangibles. Making a decision to visit a tourist destination involves significant risk, which may eventually lead tourists to become dependent on the interpersonal influence of a social network.^{4,9,22} eWOM is capable of influencing a destination's image by providing positive or negative comments related to tourists' experiences.²⁷ In fact, online suggestions/comments/reviews are capable of improving the tourist's perception of the travel product among potential users,²⁴ and thus online suggestions/comments provided by other users have a significant effect on the online sales of tourism products (eg online room booking).²⁴ As a consequence, consumers are prompted to use social media for searching information on possible tourism destinations, visualizing images and accessing other tourists' previous experiences, in order to gain sufficient elements to make the best choice.⁴

For these reasons, attention has increased towards the influence of social media in travel information search and the tools for increasing online popularity.^{26,28} In addition, previous studies determined the link between the engagement level of an organization in eWOM and the level of consumer engagement.²⁶

Hedonic aspects and enjoyment

Given the importance of hedonic aspects in the use of social networks, past studies also highlighted the importance of enjoyable aspects of using Facebook.^{4,9,22} In fact, through Facebook consumers can find information in an entertaining way by exploiting the humorous tools provided by the

system. Therefore, consumers perceive the network as enjoyable and this may represent a motivating factor for its future usage.^{4,12,47,48} Venkatesh³³ defines perceived enjoyment as the degree to which a user perceives such a technology as pleasant. Enjoyment represents an emotional state or an intrinsic motivation capable of stimulating users to continue such behaviours.^{48,49} Furthermore, a great deal of research has indicated the strong positive effects of enjoyment on attitudes towards social networks.^{4,9}

Therefore, hedonic motivation (formerly perceived enjoyment) has been found to influence directly the acceptance and usage of an information technology.⁵⁰ In fact, previous studies on social networks also included perceived enjoyment in behaviour models to gain a more accurate prediction of user acceptance towards a specific technology, due to a causal relationship between enjoyment and adoption.^{49,51}

Since these technology concerns influence consumers' intentions to use a certain system⁵² and social networks are used also as tool for supporting the purchasing process, Facebook might play a role in the decision making of buying a tourism package, booking a hotel and choosing a destination.

Davis¹⁹ defines behavioural intention as the degree to which a person has formulated conscious plans to perform or not perform some specified future behaviours. While it reflects a volitional commitment to perform a specific behaviour in the near future, the use of Facebook by young consumers can influence their intention of purchasing tourism products. As a consequence, a strong relationship between beliefs — such as ease of use and usefulness — and behavioural intention might exist.⁵² Furthermore, the behavioural intention can be expressed in terms of intention to use a certain technology and purchasing or repurchasing intention, and its effects can be mediated by word of mouth, loyalty, complaining behaviour and price sensitivity.⁵³ In this study, we consider the intention to purchase a tourism product as a consequence of interaction with Facebook.

Key factors influencing purchasing intention

Research framework and hypotheses

To develop a framework for purchasing intention of a tourism product, this study posits four determinants triggered by Facebook: (i) perceived usefulness of the social network as supporting tool; (ii) perceived ease of use of the social network (in terms of tools for sharing knowledge, ease of information access, ease of information search); (iii) perceived enjoyment while interacting within the social network; and (iv) eWOM communication emerging from this interaction among users.

This work will contribute to the research literature by focusing on the influence of the social network on young tourists who make more extensive use of Facebook and are more sensitive towards interpersonal influences. Furthermore, the chances for youth to buy a tourism product are increasing. Hence, this study advances knowledge in understanding the key factors that influence most the purchasing intention and how these data can be exploited to gain a better understanding of the choices of young tourists.

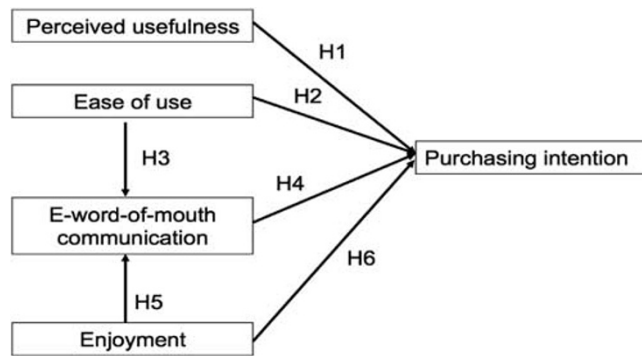


Figure 1: Research framework

Consequently, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1:** Perceived usefulness of Facebook positively influences young travellers' purchasing intention of a tourism package.
- H2:** Perceived ease of use of Facebook affects young travellers' purchasing intention of a tourism package.
- H3:** Perceived ease of use of Facebook has a strong positive relationship with electronic word of mouth communication through the social network.
- H4:** Electronic word of mouth communication influences young travellers' intentions to purchase a tourism package.
- H5:** Perceived enjoyment has a strong positive relationship with electronic word of mouth communication throughout the social network.
- H6:** Perceived enjoyment of Facebook positively affects young travellers' purchasing intentions.

We also hypothesize that the effect of eWOM communication is mediated by ease of enjoyment. We incorporate these hypotheses into an information TAM for the young traveller context. Figure 1 shows the acceptance model with our proposed constructs.

Research methodology

Defining the measurement scale

Participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire based on 18 items, including 12 items on perceived usefulness, ease of use, enjoyment, eWOM communication and behavioural intention. These were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Six consumer profiling items were also requested, including gender, age, the most used place for connecting to Facebook, experience of the network in

Table 1: Cronbach's α value

Factors	Items	Cronbach's α
Perceived usefulness (PU)	3	0.894
Perceived ease of use (EOU)	3	0.859
Perceived enjoyment (ENJ)	2	0.862
Electronic word of mouth communication (eWOM)	2	0.848
Purchasing intention (PI)	2	0.912

terms of months since the first access, the time spent during each visit and frequency of visit.

A pre-test with a convenience sample was carried out in order to calculate the minimum time needed to complete the questionnaire. This emerged as 3.6 min (mean = 3.1, maximum = 3.9), which implied that some subjects may not have taken the questionnaire seriously and may not have read the questions before answering. To avoid the error variance introduced by such subjects, 3.1 min was used as a cut-off for inclusion in the analysis. Results data were edited by checking and adjusting for errors, omissions, legibility and consistency in order to ensure completeness, consistency and readability. Given the large use of a SEM for evaluating relationships between variables and expressing complex variables in one analysis,⁵⁴ the authors used LISREL software for analysing the covariance-based SEM.

Each measurement item has been validated by analysing the value of Cronbach's α through SPSS 18.0 software (Table 1). Since the value for each variable satisfies the ones suggested,⁵⁵ the proposed research model is reliable.

Analysis of sample characteristics

Since Facebook is the most popular social network among students,⁵⁶ we focused on this social network for the research. The random sample used consists of undergraduate students from high schools in Southern Italy. From previous literature, it appears that young people are willing to adopt new technology including social networks.⁹ Therefore, it was important to find out what social network applications are important to this group of users. Participants were asked to complete anonymous surveys within a period of 3 months from November 2011 to January 2012. A total of 1,500 questionnaires were submitted and a total of 1,303 questionnaires (87 per cent of the total) were returned, which in turn generated 1,183 usable responses for statistical analysis. Table 2 summarizes the sample demographics.

Male and female respondents are similar in number (51.6 per cent female; 48.4 per cent male), while the average age of students is 18.85 years. Other demographics captured concern the technology being used, in terms of easy navigation, searching, and uploading and downloading of tourism material. Respondents reported a high mean for involvement in the social network based on the duration of each visit (35.5 per cent spend 1–3 hours each time), the length of

Table 2: Students' demographic profile

Measure	Items	Percentage of total
Gender	Male	48.4
	Female	51.6
Place for connecting to Facebook	Home	61
	School	2.4
	Internet point	5.3
	Pub	8.5
	Other	22.8
	Experience on Facebook	Under 1 month
Experience on Facebook	1–3 months	17.2
	4–12 months	12.6
	1–2 years	19.4
	More than 2 years	38.8
	Average session time on Facebook	Under 1 hour
Average session time on Facebook	1–3 hours	35.5
	More than 3 hours	16.3
	Frequency of visit	Every day
Frequency of visit	2–3 times a week	18.7
	Once a week	5.5
	Once a month	2.2
	Never	4.1

experience with Facebook (38.8 per cent are Facebook users for more than 2 years) and the high frequency of visit (69.6 per cent are connected on Facebook every day). Despite high-speed internet access in schools, the most popular place for connecting to Facebook is at home (61 per cent).

Findings

Some fitness indexes have been analysed in order to evaluate the reliability of the proposed model — χ^2 to degree of freedom, goodness-of-fit index (GFI), normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), root-mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) — as suggested by the literature.^{24,46} Table 3 makes a comparison between the values recommended by the literature and the results of the model.

Results confirm the good fit of both the model and the data structure. The subsequent path analysis has been conducted in order to evaluate the relationships among variables. In particular, the results achieved were shown to support all the hypotheses (see Table 4).

Table 4 shows that all the hypothesized relationships were found to be strongly significant at $p < 0.001$. In particular, perceived usefulness of Facebook tools (H1) and eWOM communication (H4) have the strongest impact on youth purchasing intention of a tourism package (for H1: $\beta = 0.82$, $t = 27.67$, $p < 0.001$; H4: $\beta = 0.76$, $t = 45.76$, $p < 0.001$), with a $R^2 = 0.33$ and 0.90 , respectively. H2 and H3 are also supported, by identifying a positive influence of the ease of use of Facebook tools on youth traveller purchasing intention and eWOM communication

Model reliability and validity

Table 3: Model fit indexes versus recommended values

Fit index	Recommended value	Result
$\chi^2/\text{degrees of freedom}$	<3	2.830
GFI	>0.8	0.941
AGFI	>0.8	0.906
NFI	>0.9	0.970
CFI	>0.9	0.973
RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.083

Table 4: Casual relationship values in the structural model

Hypothesized relationships	Path coefficient	t-value	Test results
H1 Perceived usefulness→Purchasing intention	0.82*	27.67*	Supported
H2 Ease of use→Purchasing intention	0.31*	9.61*	Supported
H3 Ease of use→Electronic word of mouth communication	0.26*	8.45*	Supported
H4 Electronic word of mouth communication→Purchasing intention	0.76*	45.76*	Supported
H5 Enjoyment→Electronic word of mouth communication	0.37*	8.45*	Supported
H6 Enjoyment→Purchasing intention	0.41*	14.81*	Supported

* $p < 0.001$.

(for H2: $\beta = 0.31$, $t = 9.61$, $p < 0.001$; H3: $\beta = 0.26$, $t = 8.45$, $p < 0.001$), with a $R^2 = 0.91$, and by explaining the 90 per cent of variance, which may exclude the presence of other variables. H5 and H6 are also supported, by stating that perceived enjoyment positively affects both the eWOM communication and the purchasing intention (for H5: $\beta = 0.37$, $t = 8.45$, $p < 0.001$; H6: $\beta = 0.41$, $t = 14.81$, $p < 0.001$), with $R^2 = 0.90$.

Discussion

These findings advance our knowledge of the relation between social network usage and subsequent purchasing intention of a tourism product. In particular, evidence is provided that four observed factors concerning Facebook features determined the intention to purchase a certain tourism product. The associations between the use of social network and responding behaviour are consistent with a view of Facebook as a new factor of the marketing mix that recognizes the effects of social media’s potential impact on the response behaviour of individuals.³ Specifically, we suggested that social influence in terms of eWOM communication serves the goal of exploiting Facebook for marketing purposes when measured from a young consumer’s perspective. In particular, the association between eWOM communication and purchasing intention is strong ($\beta = 0.76$).

Accordingly, our results indicated that youth who make extensive use of the social network are more likely to be influenced in their purchasing

Relation between social network usage and purchasing intention of young consumers

intention. In fact, they use the social network to find possible destinations and ask for others' opinions and judgements, which can have a positive or negative influence on their final decision. The importance of other users' opinions that emerged from our study is consistent with previous studies that highlighted the high influence of consumer reviews of tourism products (eg hotels, restaurants, destination, etc) on their behaviour.^{26,28,29} Social interactions among users, in terms of communication through posts, comments, chat and other content, are supported by the ease of use of Facebook tools and the perceived enjoyment of these tools, as confirmed by our results.

In particular, we determined positive casual relationships between ease of use and eWOM communication ($\beta = 0.26$), and perceived enjoyment and eWOM communication ($\beta = 0.37$) as anticipated by Litvin *et al.*²⁷ Hence, the effect of eWOM communication is mediated by ease of use and enjoyment. The ease of use of the channel and the environment provided motivate users to make extensive use of this channel for several purposes.⁴ Consequently, our results imply that marketers are forced to develop novel tools for involving users in the social life of the page and increasing product popularity, by taking into account the importance of ease of use and enjoyment provided by the system for motivating users to share opinions and judgements.

Ease of use not under marketers' control

Purchasing intention is also subjected to the effect of both ease of use and perceived enjoyment. It is notable that, although the availability of user-generated content might be influenced by an organization's representatives, ease of use is an element of the system that cannot be directly managed by non-Facebook administrators. In this case, representatives can only impact on perceived enjoyment and exploit the possibility to develop external applications that can be included in the system. In fact, further applications can be developed by the firm and then added to the system by non-Facebook administrators. Given the increasing number of applications related to tourism (eg TripAdvisor for Facebook), marketers should take into account the current advances in 3D graphics and virtual reality for developing more interesting applications capable of attracting users' attention on their page.

Of additional interest are the positive relationships between perceived usefulness of Facebook tools and the influence of Facebook-mediated messages on consumers' intentions. This correlation has a strong value in our analysis ($\beta = 0.82$) consistent with previous research. The usefulness of user-generated content is widely discussed in tourism studies.^{26,29} Facebook offers a platform where users may obtain useful information — either negative or positive — to support their purchasing intention (and subsequent decision-making process) and reduce the risk involved. In this way, travellers can obtain more data on destinations and on the services provided (based on others' opinions), which can reduce the cognitive load involved in creating a mental image of the destination and influencing expectations.

In addition, it should be noted that Facebook may fast become the main information source for young travellers. Hence, the possibility to create a direct communication channel between travellers and tourism representatives with their still limited presence on the social network will fast become

a key factor for achieving competitive advantage. As a consequence, the presence of tourism industry representatives on Facebook will soon be compulsory to reach potential clients.

Implications for academics and practitioners

Conclusions and limitations

This study explores the concept of social networks such as Facebook as a new channel for promoting tourism products and as a tool to influence the purchasing intention of young tourists. Findings are relevant for both researchers and hospitality managers. They should aim to make more extensive use of social networks to foster eWOM communications and thereby solicit travellers' interest. On the one hand, our results deepen the scientific debate on tourists' behavioural intentions. On the other, they provide managers with useful evidence to encourage them to integrate social networks into marketing strategies.

Managers should focus on the informative content that reflects eWOM and enjoyment constructs that enhance the perceptions of young people regarding tourism products or services. In fact, fun provided by Facebook — as well as the possibility to ask for suggestions from a large number of experienced consumers in an easy and entertaining way — motivates young people to both actively participate in the social realm and pay more attention to touristic products and services promoted via Facebook. Marketers should consider the link between the high level of enjoyment and the high information availability in order to positively affect tourists' purchasing intentions by providing innovative applications and attractive competitions. This content should be developed through the current advances in computer graphics and targeted at tourists' personal profiles. Therefore, managers should communicate product benefits and values by relying on young people to spread positive word of mouth and advise other potential tourists.

Firms can exploit the features of Facebook for building and enhancing competitive advantage along with consumers' intentions. In the ongoing competition for new international customers, tourism and hospitality academics and practitioners should pay more attention to young people because they represent a distinct and growing international travel market segment.

Future research

Although this study helps to fill a gap in the literature, limitations remain. The first regards the sample covering only the youth market (which is a segment of the population more susceptible to social networks and others' judgements), which implies no comparative element (eg no young versus old comparison). Despite the focus of this research on specific tourist destinations, the presence of different destinations may affect consumers in different ways, according to their involvement with a particular destination.

Future research might focus on extending our model to encompass other theoretical constructs, inserting new variables such as gender

diversity or group dynamics. Other studies might also investigate virtual groups of young people and the influence among its members, for instance online communities such as Google groups, Yahoo! groups and Facebook groups, in order to advance knowledge of consumer group influence.

Although our results cannot be generalized to the entire young population, this study demonstrates the importance of the youth travel market, as well as the need for further analysis of this segment.

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