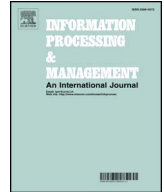




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Do online information sources really make tourists visit more diverse places?: Based on the social networking analysis

Hyunae Lee^a, Namho Chung^b, Yoonjae Nam^{c,*}

^a Department of Hotel Management, Graduate School, Kyung Hee University, Republic of Korea

^b Department of Hotel Management, College of Hotel and Tourism Management, Kyung Hee University, Republic of Korea

^c Department of Culture, Tourism & Contents, College of Hotel and Tourism Management, Kyung Hee University, 26 Kyungheedae-ro, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 02447, Republic of Korea

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Online tourism information
Offline tourism information
Smart tourism
Network analysis
Big data

ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether or not online tourism information prompted the international tourists who visited South Korea in 2015 to visit a wide range of tourism destinations, in particular those in non-capital regions, by comparing the tourist site networks of online and offline information seeker groups. It was hypothesized that the data would confirm how well the smart tourism ecosystem has been built and contributed to South Korea's tourism industry by showing that online tourism information leads tourists to visit more geographically diverse sites. Using network analysis with big data, the results showed that the offline information seeker group had geographically wider movement patterns than the online information seekers. In other words, the offline information seeker group showed movements in various directions and frequent visits to non-capital regions as opposed to the online information seeker group, which was highly dependent on the capital region. Thus, this study suggested that current online tourism information about South Korea did not provide appropriate tourism information to fulfill the needs of international tourists. This, consequently, might interrupt the implementation of smart tourism ecosystem efforts. Based on these results, this study had highlighted the importance of delivering both regionally and contextually diverse tourism information via online information sources.

1. Introduction

Tourism is an industry that contributes to overcoming local gaps by promoting regional economic development (Clarke, 1981; Jackson, 2006). However, tourism-related supply and demand is typically concentrated on specific areas even in developed countries, so there is rarely an even distribution of tourism's economic and social impact. In the case of South Korea, although it welcomed 17 million tourists in 2016 (Tourgo, 2017), the vast majority of them (78.7%) visited only Seoul, the capital city. Very few were found to visit areas outside the capital city. The ten most popular sites in South Korea were all in the Seoul region (Myung-dong; the Dongdaemun Market; the royal palaces of the Joseon Dynasty, such as Gyeongbokgung Palace and Deoksugung Palace; Namsan Mountain and Seoul Tower; Sinchon and Hong-ik University Streets; the Namdaemun Market, museums; Insa-dong; Jamsil and Lotte World; and Gangnam Station). As these data demonstrate, the degree of international tourists' concentration in specific places is significant.

This study considers a lack of regional information to be one of the most critical causes for the poor distribution of tourism monies. In other words, tourism information is often concentrated in specific well-known places, such as capital regions. This

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: halee8601@khu.ac.kr (H. Lee), nhchung@khu.ac.kr (N. Chung), ynam@khu.ac.kr (Y. Nam).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2018.01.005>

Received 26 August 2017; Received in revised form 9 December 2017; Accepted 10 January 2018

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provides international tourists with a narrower range of information and leads them to visit only a narrow range of destinations. Traditional sources of information, such as newspapers, books, and pamphlets produced by mainly tourism companies or the government tend to provide insufficient information compared to online sources (Jang, 2005). In particular, South Korean tourism companies and government agencies tend to deliver an excessive amount of information focused on specific areas (e.g., Seoul) or activities (e.g., shopping) (Korea Joongang Daily, 2017).

By contrast, online information sources are a crucial factor in the smart tourism ecosystem (Gretzel, Werthner, Koo, & Lamsfus, 2015) and provide sufficient information from a variety of information sources, from government agencies and tourism companies to peer users; this helps customers to make optimal decisions (Jang, 2005). In addition, due to the development of global positioning system (GPS) technology and the ubiquitous use of smartphones, tourists are able to acquire nearby point-of-interest information, manage street navigation, and learn about local places in real time (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Lambrinos, 2015). This can be expected to contribute to enhancing the accessibility of more potential tourist sites. With this in mind, we can say that online information helps people to visit more diverse places and ultimately reduces the regional tourism gap. This is expected to fulfill Kramer and Porter's (2011) notion of "creating shared value," the functional goal of a smart tourism ecosystem, by meeting both social needs (e.g., reducing the regional distribution of tourism) and governmental or corporate economic benefits (e.g., generating tourism revenue).

In this context, South Korean government agencies and tourism companies have tried to attract more foreign tourists by providing travel information about Korea via the Internet. For example, many Korean tourism companies have invited groups of Chinese "Wang Hong," Internet celebrities with millions of followers, to visit the country, in hopes of attracting more Chinese tourists (The Korea Times, 2017). Despite these efforts, there are very few studies to date on whether the vast investments by the government and tourism companies promoted online can solve the regional gap that Korean tourism faces.

This study divides international tourists in South Korea into two groups: online information seekers and offline information seekers, and then compares the destination networks of the groups by using social network analysis (hereafter "SNA"). SNA enables researchers and practitioners to understand the complex relationships among social entities and real issues. With this approach, we can expect to find out whether online information seekers have regionally broader destination networks than their offline counterparts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Regional gap in tourism of South Korea

After the Korean War Armistice in 1953, South Koreans and their government put their full effort into reducing famine in the country and reconstructing elements of the industrial and social infrastructure that had been destroyed during the war. In particular, the South Korean government enacted a ten-year program known as the National Comprehensive Physical Development Plan. The first National Comprehensive Physical Development Plan (1972–1981) focused on promoting effective and fast economic growth and development in a few strategic and core areas, such as Seoul (Kim, Hong, & Ha, 2003). During this period, the Korean economy developed rapidly. For example, South Korea's GDP increased from \$9.5 billion in 1971 to \$72.4 billion in 1981 (The Bank of Korea, 2017). However, these efforts also increased the economic gap between the capital and non-capital regions. Although the subsequent second, third, and fourth National Comprehensive Physical Development Plans have put more emphasis on alleviating regional disparities (Kim et al., 2003), this remains a serious issue for South Korea to solve.

As a part of these government-initiated plans, tourism-related policies have been made using a top-down approach, rather than a locally based, industry-driven one. Generally, the top-down approach to policymaking is considered less productive than locally based efforts (Jackson, 2006). Regional imbalances between the capital and non-capital regions also exist in terms of South Korean tourism. South Korea has seven major metropolitan areas, Seoul (the capital), Incheon, Daejeon, Daegu, Gwangju, Busan, and Ulsan, and nine provinces, Gyeonggi-do, Gangwon-do, Chungcheongnam-do, Chungcheongbuk-do, Gyeongsangnam-do, Gyeongsangbuk-do, Jeollanam-do, Jeollabuk-do, and Jeju Island (Fig. 1). Among these, international tourists tend to focus on Seoul, Incheon, and Gyeonggi-do, which are classified as being in the "capital region," and Jeju Island. According to Tourgo (2017), even though the number of international tourists visiting South Korea has been increasing rapidly, from 8,797,658 in 2010 to 17,241,823 in 2016, most of them visit Seoul (78.7%), the capital region (23.6%), and Jeju Island (18.3%), and only a few visited non-capital regions such as Busan (10.3%), Gangwon-do (6.4%), Gyeongsangnam-do (3.2%), Gyeongsangbuk-do (2.5%), Jeollanam-do (1.8%), Jeollabuk-do (1.7%) and other sites (multiple responses, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of South Korea, 2016).

Several reasons have been pointed out to explain why most international tourists are found in specific areas of Korea. The Korea Herald (2016) asserted that the lack of attractive spots for local tourism contents prevents international tourists from visiting non-capital regions, and The Korea Times (2010) notes that local sites often lack accessibility for foreigners. However, we can also assume that a lack of regional information on a variety of local sites may also be attributable this phenomenon, since the tourism industry is an information-intensive one in which the Internet plays an important role in promoting and marketing destinations (Doolin, Burgess, & Cooper, 2002). Today, most traditional tourist information sources in South Korea deliver an excessive amount of information that emphasizes shopping tourism (Korea Joongang Daily, 2017), but this information is generally confined to the capital region and Jeju Island, where shopping facilities are concentrated. In other words, tourism information produced and provided via a top-down approach is not enough to solve the regional imbalance in South Korean tourism.

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