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Influence of social media on travel behavior of young adults

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Introduction and problem statement

The modern life is barely imaginable without information and communication technologies and social media. Facebook registered in September 2018 2.27 billion monthly active users (Facebook, 2019), in the fourth quarter of 2017 WhatsApp had 1.5 billion users, which sent 60 billion messages daily (Verizon Media, 2018). Social media is most popular among young generations (Business Insider Deutschland, 2018), including Millennials, which were born between 1980 and 2000. Currently this generation is aged between 18 and 39 years and referred as young adults. Social media changed the way people receive information and communicate. Historically, the change of communication caused changes in mobility (Claus and Claudio, 2017). On the other hand recent mobility surveys in developed countries indicate that the travel behavior of young adults differs from the behavior of older generations. There are several reasons causing these trends. The broad use of information and communication technologies including social media is seen as one of them (Delbosc and Currie, 2013; Frändberg and Vilhelmson, 2011; Kuhnimhof et al., 2012a, 2012b). To improve the understanding whether and how the social media use by young adults influences their mobility, in particular, their leisure travel behavior. The *goal* of this study is to explore the influence of social media such as Facebook and various instant messengers on leisure travel behavior of young adults in Vienna. This study focuses only on influence of Facebook and instant messaging services and leaves the impact of other social media out of scope.

Following *hypotheses* were suggested:

H1: Social media influences mode choice and destinations.

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H2: Access to information provided by social media can increase the number of trips.

H3: Social media use can replace physical travel.

Methodology

Qualitative interviewing was chosen as the data collection method and grounded theory employed as the research method. Sixteen young adults living in Vienna in the age from 19 to 36 were interviewed. The ratio of female to male interviewees were 50% to 50%. All of them were students or graduates. The interviews were conducted in December 2016. The respondents filled out a short questionnaire covering their personal information and availability of transport means. Afterwards, they have been interviewed based upon a detailed interview guide.

Results

The analysis of interviews showed, that young adults use social media, especially Facebook, to learn about events. Sometimes the information about events leads to the actual visit. It points to the ability of social media to influence the travel behavior in terms of destinations. It can potentially increase travel, if the person otherwise would stay at home and would not travel.

Young adults used social media also for follow-up conversations to plan an events visit, to discuss location and time for meeting, mode choice and eventual ride together to the event. Since social media enable very fast communication, they are used to avoid covering unnecessary ways, and thus reducing travel. This potential can be multiplied in cases when social media is used for concurrent communication and coordination of many people involved.

When interviewees were going to undertake a trip together with other people, they used social media to announce an opportunity to share a car with them. Young adults share in this way not only private cars, but taxis too. Thus, social media has a potential to make a travel more sustainable by increasing cars occupation, and thus to decrease energy consumption needed for personal mobility.

The interviews revealed that young adults hardly follow the Facebook activity of professional mobility providers. It means that mobility providers do not reach them via social media. There are few reasons, when young adults follow Facebook activity of mobility providers: entertaining content, relevance for their mobility decisions and possibility to learn about promotions to get a discount for transport service.

Young adults actively use the routing tools for public transport. The popularity of routing apps correlates to their preference of public transport, which may mean that such apps made the use of public transport more convenient, thus the use of public transport increased; or the other way, the widespread use of routing apps is a reaction to increased demand for real-time information caused by frequent use of public transport.

The respondents often use web mapping services such as Google Maps. The frequent use of Google Maps and car navigation may lead to the decrease of ability to find and remember ways and directions; young adults often need information and communication technologies to navigate in unknown areas.

In some cases, the use of social media increased travel, when young adults get to know more people, visit and meet them more often. Sometimes, social media can have a negative effect on the frequency of face-to-face meetings, because constant contact via social media eliminates the need to meet in person. Most respondents suppose that social media did not change the number of their personal meetings, but made them more spontaneous.

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