UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN TRAVEL: PRE-, IN- AND POST-TRAVEL

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ABSTRACT

Social media play a significant role in the development of the tourism industry; especially in shaping traveller's behaviour during the stages of travel. This study aims to explore the motivators for using social media at pre-, in- and post-travel stages from the uses and gratifications perspective. In this qualitative study, 12 international students were interviewed who were both social media users and travellers. The results show that technology gratification, content gratification, and social gratification are solid motivators for travellers to use social media. Further, the motivators vary at different stages of travel. The findings of this research generate additional insights into individuals' social media use following different stages and provide a deeper understanding of travellers' social media use according to their travel stages. This study also offers some practical advice for tourism operators on how to promote social media use in travel.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Pre-travel, In-travel, Post-travel, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Motivation

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media are changing the way people travel. According to the annual report in 2018, TripAdvisor achieved 490 million average monthly unique visitors (TripAdvisor, 2018). Despite the growing increase of social media users in the travel field, questions remain about how to promote social media use at all stages of travel. Previous studies have focused on social media use at the pre-travel stage, such as information seeking and planning (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2011, 2012) , but have largely ignored the in- and post-travel stages. It is important to explore what motivates individuals to use social media at all stages of travel.

Previous studies have employed different theories to investigate social media use in travel, such as the motivation, opportunity and ability (MOA) model (Parra-Lopez, Gutierrez-Tano, Diaz-Armas, & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2012), value-based adoption model (VAM) (Chung & Koo, 2015), and elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Hur, Kim, Karatepe, & Lee, 2017). Recently, the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory (Katz, 1974) has attracted the attention of researchers in the field of social media (e.g., Gan & Li, 2018; Li, Liu, Xu, Heikkila, & van der Heijden, 2015; Liu, Cheung, & Lee, 2016). The findings of previous research show that gratifications significantly affect social media use, but the impacts of different gratifications vary in different contexts. In addition, although previous studies have investigated social media use in travel, few studies have explored social media use according to travel stages, such as pre-, in-, and post-travel. There is a lack of knowledge from the all travel stages perspective.

The aim of this study is to examine the use of social media gratifications in different travel stages, namely pre-, in-, and after-travel. Qualitative research was conducted to collect data from social media users who have travel experiences. Specifically, we adopted the U&G framework to analyse the data. In doing so, this research could shed light on the gratifications of social media use in all stages of

travel. In addition, investigating gratifications in tourism could facilitate the understanding of gratifications in different contexts. Finally, this research could provide practical advice to tourism operators on how to promote social media use for travellers.

This paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review about social media use in tourism and U&G is provided. Then, the research method is introduced and data analysis is presented. Next, the findings of this research are presented. Finally, the contributions and limitations of this study are discussed.

2 Literature review

2.1 Social media use in travel

Social media are defined 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 User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media have been considered as important tools for travelers to seek information and share experiences. Previous studies have evidenced that social media use is more extensive before travelling. For instance, the findings of Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, and Buultjens (2009) have shown that social media are mostly used at pre-travel stage rather than in-travel and post-travel stages. Fotis et al. (2011) have found that social media are important information sources for travelers to make a plan and decision before actually visiting the destinations. Travelers can also use social media to search and share information during the trip, and to share their experience via posting photos and writing reviews after trip (Amaro & Duarte, 2017; Fotis et al., 2012). Few studies has attempted to examine whether motivations to social media vary at different stages of travel in one study. Thus, it is important to investigate the social media use in all travel stages, namely, pre-, in-, and post-travel.

2.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory

U&G theory offers a research framework to identify the social and psychological factors that determine individuals' use of social media (Gan & Li, 2018). According to the U&G theory (Katz, 1974), an individual is active in using a particular media to gratify his/her specific needs. U&G has been widely used in the research of social media. Previous research has adopted U&G theory to investigate why people actively use particular social media to satisfy personal needs, such as Facebook (Malik, Dhir, & Nieminen, 2016), Twitter (Coursaris, Van Osch, Sung, & Yun, 2013), and WeChat (Gan & Li, 2018).

Previous research has categorized gratifications related to social media into different types. For instance, the research of Xu, Ryan, Prybutok, and Wen (2012) have revealed that the use of SNS is determined by utilitarian gratification (immediate access and coordination) and hedonic gratification (leisure and affection). In the work of Liu et al. (2016), technology gratification (convenience, medium appeal, and social presence) and content gratification (information sharing, self-documentation, and self-expression) have been found to affect user satisfaction with microblogging. Gan and Li (2018) have found that users' continuance use of WeChat is motivated by hedonic gratification (perceived enjoyment), utilitarian gratification (information sharing), and technology gratification (media appeal).

U&G theory is suitable for investigating the social media use in travel. First, it helps to explain the social media use on the individual level. Second, it is suitable to study the motivations in the context of social media (Li et al., 2015). Travelers choose social media to fulfil their different needs, such as information seeking, information sharing, and recommending. Thus, U&G theory is appropriate for explaining whether different gratifications determine travelers' social media use at different stages of travel. Based on U&G theory, this study proposes that gratifications will affect travelers' use of social media at pre-travel, in-travel, and post-travel stages. Four gratifications are suggested in this study: hedonic, social, content, and technology gratifications.

3 Methods

To explore the social media use gratifications in different travel stages, we conducted a qualitative approach to collect data among international social media users who also have travel experience in the last 12 months.

3.1 Data collection

The data was collected via semi-structured interviews and the participants were recruited via WeChat in 2019. The interview was conducted via email or WeChat call after the respondents agreed to join in the project voluntarily. Each participant had to complete the interview questions in two weeks and then they received a random red packet on WeChat (from 0 to 50 RMB) as an incentive. Before the interview, they were informed of the aim of this study, the confidentiality of the collected data, privacy protection in this study, and the contact information. After the interviewees responded to the questions, further questions were asked to confirm their intentions and the whole record of the review was sent to each participant to check if the document recorded their opinions correctly (Myers & Newman, 2007). The interviews were conducted in Chinese, as most of the respondents were Chinese. Then the questions and answers were translated into English for data analysis. Two researchers who speak both English and Chinese checked the interview text to decrease the risk of bias in the transcription. Table 1 shows the interview questions.

Table 1. Questions Included in the Email Interview in This Study

Open questions	1. What kind of social media do you use usually?
	2. Why do you use social media?
	3. Did you use social media when making a traveling plan? Why? Please provide explanations for your answer.
	4. Did you use social media when you are traveling? Why? Please provide explanations for your answer.
	5. Did you use social media after the travel? Why? Please provide explanations for your answer.

Table 2. Sociodemographic and Descriptive Characteristics of the Respondents

	Characteristics	Number (%)		Characteristics	Number (%)
Gender	Female	7 (58.3%)		WeChat	12 (100.0%)
	Male	5 (41.7%)		Weibo	8 (66.7%)
Age	17-21	3 (25.0%)		Facebook	6 (50.0%)
	22-26	4 (33.3%)		QQ	6 (50.0%)
	27-31	5 (41.7%)	**Social media type**	WhatsApp	1 (8.3%)
Education level	Undergraduate	4 (33.3%)		Instagram	1 (8.3%)
	Graduate	2 (16.7%)		Douban	1 (8.3%)
	Postgraduate	6 (50.0%)		Red Book	1 (8.3%)
				Mafengwo	2 (16.7%)
				Zhihu	1 (8.3%)

Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents. All of the respondents are young (ages from 17-31) and have a high education background. They enjoy multiple social media as every respondent mentioned at least two different social media. WeChat is the most used medium, as the utilization rate is 100% among the respondents. Then Weibo also plays an important role among respondents, which ranked second in social media usage. Facebook and QQ come third and joint fourth as only half respondents reported using them. As Facebook has been blocked in China, half of respondents reported that they did not use Facebook. Except for these popular social media, some respondents mentioned specific social media related to travel, such as Red Book and Mafengwo.

3.2 Data analysis

The answers from 12 respondents were analysed to identify the different gratifications in different travel stages based on their perceptions and descriptions of the social media use. Particularly, the gratifications include many dimensions, such as social interaction, enjoyment, information sharing, self-documentation, self-expression, convenience, medium appeal, and social presence (see Table 3).

To extract gratifications from the interview data, each response was screened from pre-travel to post-travel. First, use social media to satisfy both contact requirements and travel suggestions obtaining from friends and family purpose was considered as social gratification. Next, enjoy or have fun with the travel information from social media was deemed as hedonic gratification. Both searching for and sharing travel pictures, texts, or videos on social media platforms were summarised as information sharing. Using social media to track a specific journey was marked as self-documentation. Trying to convey travel feelings or experiences on social media reflected the travellers' self-expression willingness. Thus, information sharing, self-documentation, self-expression were considered as content gratification. Furthermore, obtaining travel information from social media effortlessly was referred to convenience of social media use, express themselves about travelling immediately on an appropriate social medium was referred to medium appeal, and establishing connections with strangers or online travel agencies was referred to social presence. Convenience, medium appeal, and social presence were deemed as technology gratification.

Table 3. Key Concepts and Descriptions of Uses and Gratifications

Gratification	Dimension	Description
Social gratification	Social interaction	Social interaction refers to which using social media to maintain friendship or make new connection with others (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007)
Hedonic gratification	Enjoyment	Enjoyment refers to which using social media are perceived to be enjoyable (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
Content gratification	Information sharing	Information sharing refers to which using social media information and then the information can be passed on by its originators to other users. (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Thelwall, Buckley, & Paltoglou, 2011).
	Self-documentation	Self-documentation refers to which using social media to document daily activities (Java et al., 2007).
	Self-expression	Self-expression refers to which using social media to convey information to others, such as personal status, feelings, pictures, etc. (Papacharissi, 2002).
Technology gratification	Convenience	Convenience refers to which using social media to obtain the information with little effort via the platforms (Leung & Wei, 2000)
	Medium appeal	Medium appeal refers to which using appropriate social media to post things they want to say in an immediate way (James, Wotring, & Forrest, 1995).
	Social presence	Social presence refers to which using social media to establish connection between two communication partners acoustically, visually, and physically (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

In this study, narrative analysis approach was applied to analyse the response from interviewees. Through this method, the gratifications were able to identify at different travel stages. To ensure the data was interpreted in an appropriate way, the study of Baxter and Eyles (1997) was played as a guide to establish *rigor* in interview analysis. Based on the evaluation checklist mention in their article, each response was evaluated and the gratification dimensions were marked with *yes*, *no*, and *not mentioned*. *Yes* means a specific gratification was reflected from the response. *No* means the respondent stated they did not use social media at that travel stage, no gratification therefore produced. *Not mentioned* means the gratification was not mentioned in the answer. Furthermore, the travel stages and different gratifications were combined to make a matrix to identify the gratifications in pre-, in-, and post-travel stages.

4 Findings

4.1 Overview of findings

Based on the report from interviewees, all of the four types of gratifications mentioned in the previous section could be found from social media use in travel. An overview of different gratifications at pre-, in-, and post-travel stages was presented in Table 4.

Table 4. An Overview of Gratifications at Pre-, In-, Post-travel Stages

Participant	Age	Gender	Travel Stage	Social Gratification	Hedonic Gratification	Content Gratification	Technology Gratification
1	17-21	Female	Pre-	Yes	-	Yes	-
			In-	-	-	Yes	-
			Post-	-	-	-	-
2	27-31	Male	Pre-	-	-	No	No
			In-	-	-	-	-
			Post-	Yes	-	Yes	-
3	27-31	Male	Pre-	-	-	Yes	Yes
			In-	Yes	-	Yes	No
			Post-	-	-	Yes	Yes
4	22-26	Female	Pre-	-	-	Yes	Yes
			In-	-	-	Yes	Yes
			Post-	-	-	Yes	-
5	27-31	Male	Pre-	-	-	No	No
			In-	-	-	Yes	-
			Post-	-	-	No	-
6	27-31	Female	Pre-	Yes	Yes	No	-
			In-	-	-	No	No
			Post-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
7	22-26	Male	Pre-	-	-	Yes	Yes
			In-	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
			Post-	-	-	Yes	-
8	27-31	Female	Pre-	-	-	Yes	-
			In-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
			Post-	-	-	Yes	-
9	17-21	Female	Pre-	-	-	Yes	Yes
			In-	-	-	-	Yes
			Post-	-	-	Yes	Yes
10	22-26	Female	Pre-	-	-	Yes	Yes
			In-	-	-	Yes	Yes
			Post-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
11	17-21	Female	Pre-	Yes	-	Yes	-
			In-	-	-	-	-
			Post-	-	-	Yes	-
12	22-26	Male	Pre-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
			In-	-	-	Yes	Yes
			Post-	-	-	Yes	-

Note: "-", not mentioned by the interviewees.

4.2 Gratification at pre-travel stage

At pre-travel stage, social gratification, hedonic gratification, content gratification, and technology gratification were found to motivate social media use. Social gratification (social interaction) was one of the reasons for travelers to use social media in this stage. The respondents stated it is necessary to consult their friends or family ahead to achieve travel experiences or suggestions. When

they planned to travel with their friends, social media are important tools for them to make the travel plan together. Hedonic gratification (enjoyment) was another reason for travelers to use social media at pre-travel stage. One of the respondents has mentioned watching short videos about destinations on WeChat Moments is very interesting. Content gratification (information sharing) is another important reason for them to use social media, as they highlighted that social media make travel guides and the latest travel information accessible. The participants also reported that they use appropriate social media to establish connections easily, such as communication with travel agencies on WeChat directly. Thus, technology gratification (social presence) was also considered as a motivator for social media use at pre-travel stage. However, two participants refused to use social media at pre-travel stage because they relied on friends recommendations or they believed travel guides could be available via direct online searching. For instance, participant 2 said, "*Because of the shortage of information, the value of the information on social media is limited.*" (see Figure 1)
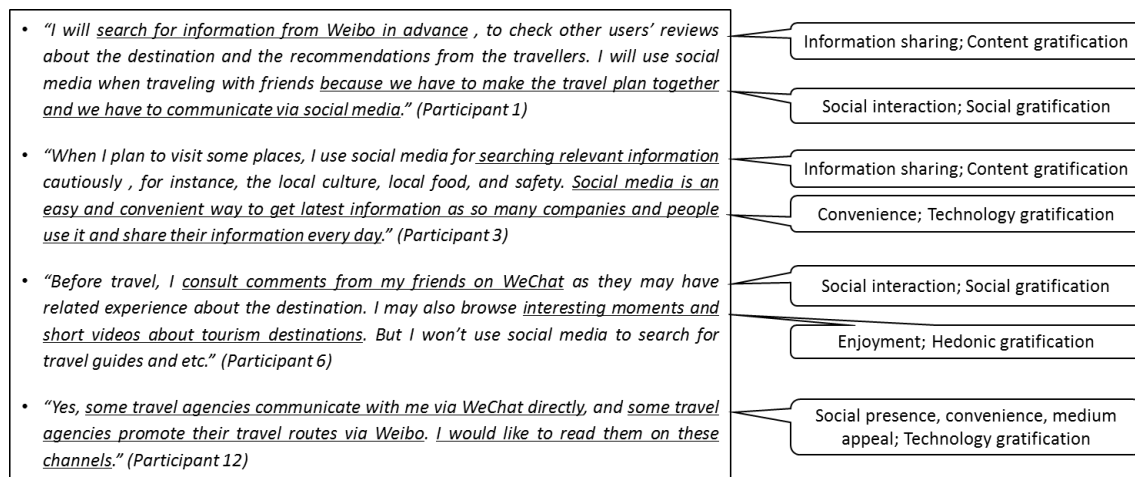
- "I will _search for information from Weibo in advance_ , to check other users' reviews about the destination and the recommendations from the travellers. I will use social media when traveling with friends _because we have to make the travel plan together and we have to communicate via social media_." (Participant 1)

  → Information sharing; Content gratification
  → Social interaction; Social gratification

- "When I plan to visit some places, I use social media for _searching relevant information cautiously_ , for instance, the local culture, local food, and safety. _Social media is an easy and convenient way to get latest information as so many companies and people use it and share their information every day_." (Participant 3)

  → Information sharing; Content gratification
  → Convenience; Technology gratification

- "Before travel, I _consult comments from my friends on WeChat_ as they may have related experience about the destination. I may also browse _interesting moments and short videos about tourism destinations_. But I won't use social media to search for travel guides and etc." (Participant 6)

  → Social interaction; Social gratification
  → Enjoyment; Hedonic gratification

- "Yes, _some travel agencies communicate with me via WeChat directly, and some travel agencies promote their travel routes via Weibo. I would like to read them on these channels._" (Participant 12)

  → Social presence, convenience, medium appeal; Technology gratification

Figure 1. Evidence of Gratifications of Social Media Use at Pre-travel Stages

4.3 Gratification at in-travel stage

At in-travel stage, all of the four gratifications were answered as motivations of social media use by the interviewees as well. Examples with more details are shown in Figure 2.

- "I will. _I share photos and travel feelings on social media_ . Sometimes, I write travel guide and share it on social media . _I also use WeChat mini-program for travel aims, such as the electronic guide of the Palace Museum_." (Participant 4)

  → Information sharing; Content gratification
  → Convenience; Technology gratification

- "_Keeping contact with my travel group members , participating in the interactive activities provided by the attractions_." (Participant 7)

  → Social interaction; Social gratification
  → Enjoyment; Hedonic gratification

- "I don't use social apps for traveling, but usually _pin my location during a journey_ (e.g., in wechat), just for an _easier looking back_ when I want to recall. Location also provides _important information to my friends if they have some related topics and would like to share with me_." (Participant 8)

  → Information sharing, self-documentation, self-expression; Content gratification
  → Social interaction; Social gratification

- "_I use Dianping for finding food recommendation_. I also use the map app, such as _Baidu map_, and Amap." (Participant 9)

  → Convenience; Technology gratification

- "Yes, I will. The purpose is similar to making a travel plan. During the travel, _I have to change the travel plan or make a new travel plan based on the situation. Social media provide useful information to me_. Besides, I also _share new things or interesting things on social media via texts, videos, and photos_." (Participant 12)

  → Convenience; Technology gratification
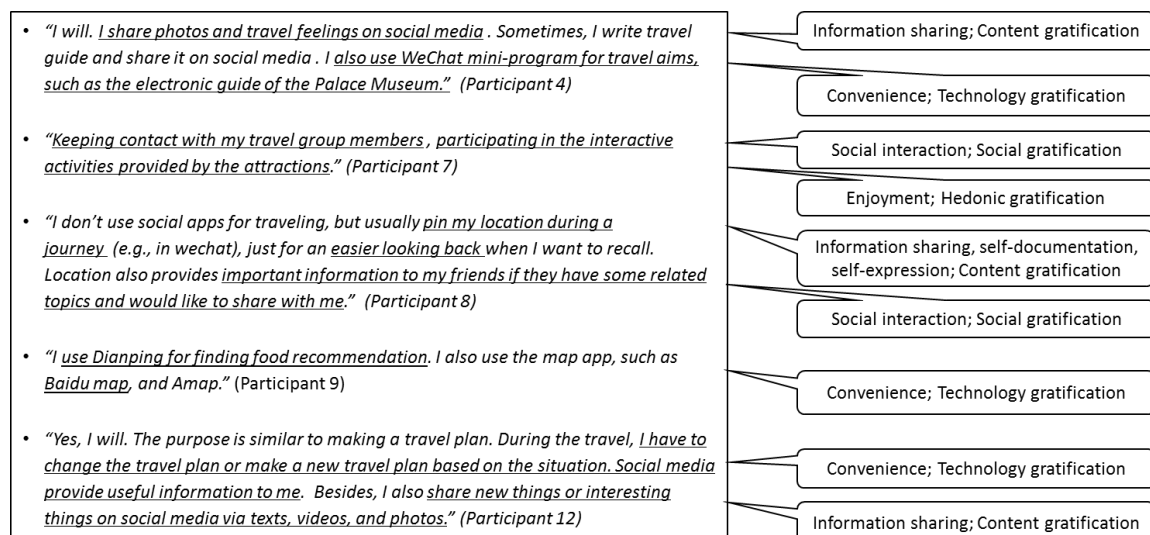 → Information sharing; Content gratification

Figure 2. Evidence of Gratifications of Social Media Use at In-travel Stages

The participants achieved technology gratification (convenience, medium appeal) via changing their travel plan easily during the travel, finding delicacy from Dianping (a social networking site similar to TripAdvisor) recommendation, and electronic guide on WeChat mini-program. The participants also stated they use social media to share travel information, track their journeys, and express their feelings. All these behaviours related to content gratification from information sharing, self-documentation, and self-expression dimensions. One participant also mentioned they use social media to enjoy the interactive activities at the attractions. Thus, hedonic gratification (enjoyment) could be achieved by using social media. Additionally, keeping contact with travel partner, friends or family were typical social media use behaviour during travel. Participants emphasized the importance of social interaction with friends or relatives continuously. However, there are two participants highlighted they tend to not use social media in travel because of the limited travelling time. Take the response from participant 6 as an example, "*The most frequent app I used during travel is Google map because it contains most information I need*." No gratification could be received as little use of social media.

4.4 Gratification at post-travel stage

At post-travel stage, social, content, and technology gratification were seen from the response of interviewees, while the respondents did not mention the hedonic gratification. Content gratification (information sharing, self-documentation, self-expression) was demonstrated as an important gratification via using social media at this stage as ten of 12 respondents emphasized this. The participants declared that sharing travel photos, experiences, and feelings on social media is a part of travel; they tend to process the photos and consider travel feelings after travel. Nevertheless, participant 5 stressed that he would share nothing after travel, as he said:

"*After travel, I will use social media because I am an intensive social media user no matter I travel or not. Regarding the purpose.... If my usage behaviour is related to travel, I won't share any travel information after travel because sharing too much might annoy others.*"

The participants also emphasized that their friendship was strengthened via sharing travel experience on social media. Therefore, social gratification was obtained via interaction among friends at this stage. The participants mentioned that there are sufficient social channels to satisfy their immediate self-express demands as well. The medium appeal is the reason why they release the travel information on these special media. Consequently, technology gratification could be received by using social media here (see Figure 3).
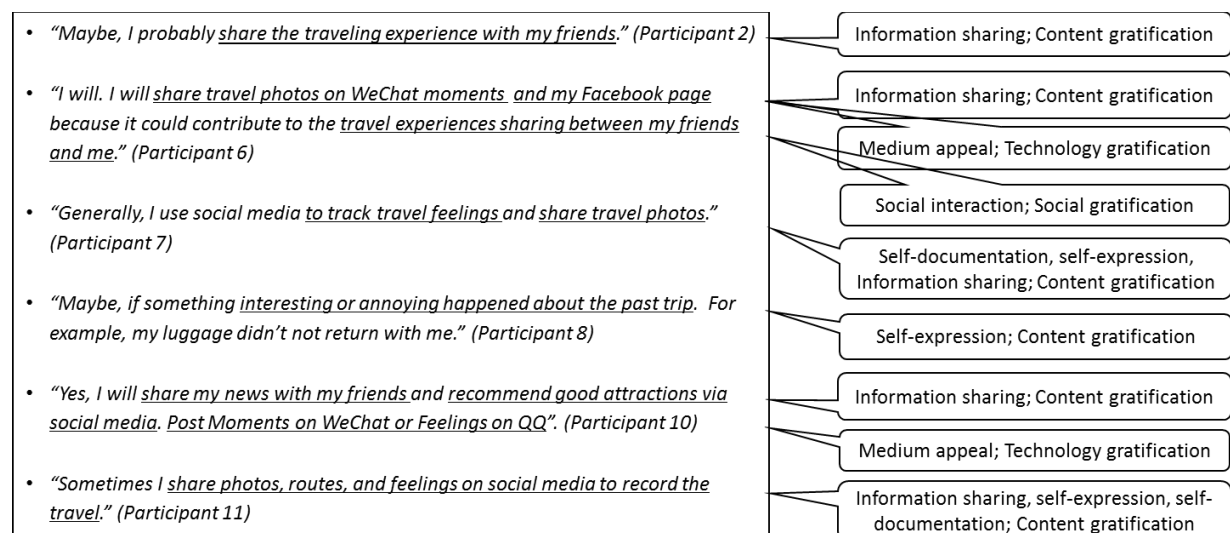

Figure 3. Evidence of Gratifications of Social Media Use at Post-travel Stages

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has applied uses and gratification theory to investigate the gratifications of social media use in travelling context. The results of the data analysis indicated that user gratification with social media use at three travel stages was influenced by social, hedonic, content and technology gratifications. To be more specifically, user satisfaction with social media at pre-, in-, post-travel depended on the satisfaction that users found in social interaction, enjoyment, information sharing, self-documentation, self-expression, convenience, medium appeal, and social presence.
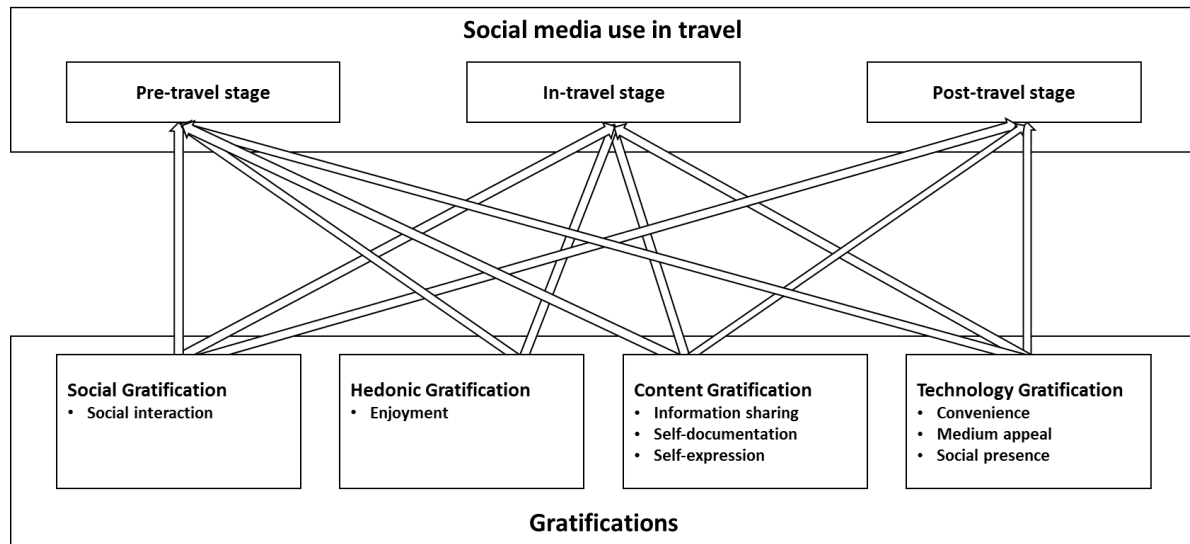
Figure 4. Gratification of Social Media Use in Different Travel Stages

First, at the pre-travel stage, social media are important channels to access the travel information, searching for information on social media means the information dissemination on social media. Thus, one interesting question is whether social media could meet their demands, if the answer is yes, they tend to use social media; if the answer is no, they tend to seek information from other channels because of the limited information on social media at this stage. Though content gratification (information sharing) has been identified as a critical motivator for users to use social media at this stage, it does not mean every traveller could achieve content gratification. The findings of the study concur with previous research that information searching has a strong impact on the satisfaction of social media users at pre-travel (Chung & Koo, 2015).

Second, at the in-travel stage, social media also play a significant role as all the eight gratification dimensions mentioned previous has been identified at this stage. It indicates social media could meet travelers' diversity demands at this stage, from keeping in track with friends to tracking the journey, from keeping informed about the latest information to facilitating enjoy the interactive activities at attractions. This finding is contrary to previous findings that social gratification is not important in explaining social media use (Liu et al., 2016). This difference may cause by the research context, as Liu et al. (2016) emphasized the use of microblogging, however, in this study the use of social media are widely and the travelers have a strong intention to keep contact with friends and family (Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Tavitiyaman, 2017).

Third, this study also indicates that hedonic gratification does not have any effect on user satisfaction with social media use at post-travel stage. The potential explanation is people at post-travel stage have already visited the travel destinations, the level of freshness and enjoyment might decrease compared with the other stages of travel, even though sharing travel feelings or experiences via social media might awake some good memories.

This study makes several theoretical implications. First, this study disentangles the four different types of gratifications in the research context of social media use in travel, namely, hedonic,

social, content, and technology gratifications. The research findings in this study indicate that U&G theory is a good theoretical framework to explain social media use in all travel stages. Second, the findings on the different roles of the social, hedonic, content, and technology gratifications at different stages of travel. This finding indicates that it is important to take the stage of travel into consideration in investigating social media use in travel.

The research findings in this study also bear practical implications. This study identifies four different gratifications and highlights the importance of social, content, and technology gratifications at all travel stages. The findings indicate that travel-related social media providers should consider the three different gratifications in the functional design in order to meet travellers' needs. In addition, the study found that hedonic gratification is not critical at post-travel. This finding indicates that it might be necessary for designers to consider the different roles of hedonic gratification at different stages of travel.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the study collected data via email and WeChat call interview instead of a face-to-face interview, which may not offer in-depth information on explain the social media use at all travel stages. Thus, further study should use other methods for collecting data, such as face-to-face interviews. Second, the number of interviews is relatively small. Only 12 interviewees participated in this research. More interviews are required to offer strong evidence of social media use in travel. Third, all respondents are Chinese. The findings of this study may not be generalized to other cultures. Future research should extend this research framework to other nations to validate our findings.

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