

Chapter 3

Social Media Impacts on Travelers

Abstract This chapter examines the impact social media can have on travelers' behavior, through the integration of decision-making studies and travel planning theories. Influences of social media are analyzed for each step of the travel planning process: before leaving (pre-trip), during the stay (during-trip), and after having come back home (post-trip). The second part of the chapter focuses on travel experience sharing activity. In particular, reasons for sharing, dimensions of co-creation, and main mediators of travel experience are examined. Finally, demographics and various roles of social media users (lurkers, posters, and shoppers) are discussed.

3.1 Consumer Behavior in Tourism

Travel services are mostly considered experience products (Cohen 1979; Uriely 2005; Moscardo 2010; Sundbo and Sørensen 2013), mainly intangible (Murray and Schlacter 1990; Gremler et al. 1994) whose quality is difficult to be evaluated prior to consumption (Rosen 2000, 2009; Dye 2000; Zeithaml et al. 2012). These features determine high customers' involvement in buying decision practices and a consequent high-risk perception that usually generates a longer and more complex consumer behavior process (Murray and Schlacter 1990; Laroche et al. 2004). Furthermore, purchases of travel services more and more take place in the online environment where consumers' behavior has specific features (Viglia 2014).

In order to analyze how consumers buy tourism services, a brief review of the theories regarding purchasing process are presented.

According to the decision-making studies, the traveler buying process consists of five stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior (Kotler et al. 2010; Zeithaml et al. 2012).

Another perspective of analysis of the tourists' planning process (travel planning theory) suggests a temporal perspective based on a process generally composed by

Table 3.1 The stages of consumers' behavior and the travel planning process

Consumer behavior stages	Three-phase travel planning process
Need recognition	Pre-trip phase (anticipatory)
Information search	
Evaluation of alternatives	
Purchase decision	
Post-purchase (post-decision behavior)	
Consumption	During-trip phase (experiential)
Post-purchase (post-consumption behavior)	Post-trip phase (reflective)

Source author's elaboration

three phases: pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip (Engel et al. 1990); the anticipatory phase, the experiential phase, and the reflective phase (Craig-Smith and French 1994; Jennings 1997, 2006).¹

The first approach (decision-making studies) is supposed to be more related to people deciding for a single purchase (Jun et al. 2007), while the second one (travel planning theory) considers travel planning as more complex in nature as it implies interrelated actions about a combination of many services at the same time to achieve multiple goals (Stewart and Vogt 1999; Dellaert et al. 2014). Hereafter, we will try to integrate the two aforementioned approaches (decision-making studies and travel planning theory) considering the stages need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives and booking/purchase as part of the pre-trip phase (anticipatory), the consumption as part of the during-trip stage (experiential), and post-consumption as part of post-trip (reflective) (Table 3.1).

Travel planning starts with the recognition of a need that can be generated by internal and external stimuli. Therefore, previous experience guides the customer toward a specific product that he or she knows could satisfy that specific need. Moreover, suggestions of other people, commercials, or other marketing stimuli can influence the customer's identification of which activity could satisfy that need (Kotler et al. 2010).

After having recognized their needs, people try to find information about goods and services able to grant satisfaction. Consumers generally employ both personal and nonpersonal sources in order to obtain thorough information (Zeithaml et al. 2012). Personal information comes from word-of-mouth spread by family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, etc., while nonpersonal information is represented by both online and offline commercial sources (corporate website, advertising, salespeople, etc.) and public/third parties sources (official classifications, customers reviews, ratings, rankings, awards, etc.) (Kotler et al. 2010).

¹ Scholars have different perspectives on defining the temporal nature of tourism experiences. Killion (1992) presents the travel experience as a circular model adapting the "linear" recreation experience model of Clawson (1963) composed by the following phases: "planning", "travel to", "on-site activities", "return travel", and "recollection". For further insights see Jennings (2006).

Table 3.2 Online sources of information in the travel planning process

Information	Consumer generated	Social networks profiles Personal blogs Content communities profiles	Corporate website Corporate blog Social networks pages Content communities pages	OTAs (rating/rankings) Meta-search Travel review websites Travel blogs Wikis
	Firm generated	Online notices on social media	Corporate website Corporate blog Social network pages Content communities pages	Online ads Travel review websites Travel blogs Travel distribution channels
	Third parties generated	-	-	Associations' ratings (i.e. Forbes travel guide, AAA) Online tourist guides (Lonely Planet) Online ads
		Consumer	Producer	Third parties
		Property of the website		

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We already discussed in the previous chapter the higher credibility of word-of-mouth (offline and online) versus corporate communication in driving consumers behavior. Personal and public sources of information, meant as experiences of other customers (both friends and strangers) and quality indicators (rating, ranking, etc.), can help customers reducing the perception of risk. However, with the broad diffusion of information technology, we can identify an overlap between the concepts of personal and public sources of information. In fact, online reviews of other customers are personal information that comes from friends and/or strangers on online public platforms. Table 3.2 shows a classification of main online sources of information according to two dimensions: the generator of information (consumer/firm/third parties)² and the property of the website where the information is displayed.

Online information can be generated by customers (actual customers and prospects) who post content on their social media profiles, on those of other people

² Online consumer-generated (inbound) and firm-generated (outbound) communication flows are studied by Gallagher and Ransbotham (2010) and Noone et al. (2011). Gallagher and Ransbotham (2010) identify a "Firm and customer communication path with social media" where inbound information flow is the "magnet" to draw firm-customer dialog while outbound information flow is the "megaphone" that the firm can use to share its message by means of social media.

(friends or bloggers), on the corporate website, blog, or social media page, as well as on third parties websites (i.e., OTAs, meta-search websites, travel review websites, and travel blogs). An interesting case is that of OTAs and meta-search websites that generally offer different kind of information on the basis of consumer-generated communication flows. A first type is the authentic content published by the customers themselves: reviews, scores, photos, videos, etc. A second category is represented by the overall rating and the ranking generated by the elaboration of single customers' scores by means of a specific algorithm.³

Online information can be generated also by firms on their corporate websites, blogs, social media pages (social networks and content communities) as well as on third parties websites. For example, online advertisements, responses, and content published on TripAdvisor, posts on travel blogs, or different kind of content (textual, visual) published by companies on online distribution channels. With the spread of social media, firms can also have the opportunity to communicate with users on their social media personal profiles. For example, Facebook users who "like" a brand page will receive directly posts containing specific information that, in turn, can be shared with their network of friends (advised posts). In this case, information generated by a firm, if able to engage customers creating the willing to share it, can then turn into personal information of friends. Furthermore, opportunities to customize social media advertisements on the basis of different target markets allow companies to obtain an increasing presence on customers' personal profiles.

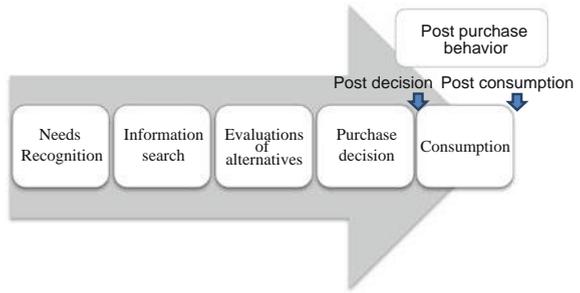
Finally, online information can come from third parties organizations of associations, travel clubs, and tourist guides, generally existing also offline, that offer official ratings, hotel information, destination and attractions descriptions, etc. (e.g., Forbes Travel Guide, American Automobile Association-AAA, Lonely Planet, etc.).

At the end of the step of information search, customers have identified a set of alternatives: a group of products considered acceptable options in a certain product category. The product is composed by different attributes that are evaluated on the basis of subjective factors, depending on the importance given to each attribute according to customer's needs and wants (Kotler et al. 2010).

After the evaluation of different alternatives, the customer decides to buy or not to buy. Sometimes purchase intentions can be affected by other factors, hardly under the control of the company: attitudes of others and unexpected situational factors may influence customers' final decision to purchase. For example, the behavior of other members of the family could influence the decision about a holiday or an unexpected expense could have an effect on the decision if make holiday that year, or simply on the selection of destination. Also in case of the actual purchase decision, the perception of risk can persist because the customer generally books or purchases the service in advance respect to the actual vacation period. In this case, especially when there is a significant amount of time between

³ The example of TripAdvisor popularity index is reported in Sect. 2.7.1.

Fig. 3.1 The stages of consumer behavior process in tourism. *Source* author’s elaboration



the booking/purchasing action and the actual consumption, post-purchase behavior plays a key role because customers may try to find elements able to reassure themselves about the decision taken.

Considering this characteristic of travel services, post-purchase behavior can be divided in post-decision behavior and post-consumption behavior (Fig. 3.1). This distinction is particularly important because the influence of other sources of information or situational factors could affect the post-decision stage, interrupting the customer behavior process with the booking cancelation before the actual consumption, or even with a no-show.

The consumption stage in the service sector is a process composed by various stages and activities, characterized by interactions between the consumer and the companies involved in the service delivery (Zeithaml et al. 2012). In fact, during a travel experience, the customer interacts with different stakeholders present throughout the service delivery that mediate the overall experience (Wang et al. 2012): companies (transportation companies, hotels, travel agents, local attractions, etc.), different employees of the companies according to the kind of service experience (check-in, food and beverage, etc.),⁴ and other people (customers, residents, etc.). For example, in the case of a hotel stay, the guest’s experience could be influenced by the presence of noisy customers that disturb the check-in process or the dinner at the hotel restaurant. Therefore, all these interactions affect customers’ perceptions and consequently their service quality evaluations of the overall experience (Zeithaml et al. 2012). In other words, customers are partners of the company and participate in the consumption co-producing the service (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004).

At the end of the consumer purchasing process, there is the post-consumption stage in which the evaluation of the service quality takes place. In particular, customers compare expectations and perceptions as a progressive process starting from the first stages of the booking process, and arriving at a final and overall customer satisfaction judgment that considers perceived service quality, the

⁴ Normann (1984) defines “moments of truth” the interactions between the consumers and the company staff because they are moments in which the staff can really demonstrate the service quality. The topic of Service Encounters is studied also by Bitner et al. (1990).

price/prices paid, personal factors, and situational factors (Zeithalm et al. 2012). On the basis of the satisfaction/dissatisfaction evaluation, customers may activate a positive or negative word-of-mouth and decide if becoming loyal. In the case of cognitive dissonance, which comes from a disconfirmation caused by post-purchase conflict, the customer could stop buying the product (exit) or give voice to dissatisfaction (voice) (Hirschman 1970) and take actions in order to reduce dissonance (Oliver 1980, 1993); for example, complaining and developing online and offline negative word-of-mouth.

Next paragraphs will study more in-depth the concept of travel experience and social media influence on the steps of the traveler planning process: pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip phases.

3.2 The Travel Experience

Tung and Ritchie (2011) define a travel experience as “an individual’s subjective evaluation and undergoing (i.e. affective, cognitive, and behavioral) of events related to his/her tourist activities that begins before (i.e. planning and preparation), during (i.e. at the destination) and after the trip (i.e. recollection).”⁵ As we know from the literature, different people can desire different kind of tourist experiences (Cohen 1979) and, as we mentioned in the previous paragraph, the evaluation of their quality comes from a comparison between expectations and perceptions. According to the approach developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), Zeithaml et al. (1993), expectations are influenced by personal needs, previous experience, word-of-mouth, explicit service promises (e.g., advertising), implicit service promises (i.e., price, tangibles), transitory service intensifiers (e.g., emergencies, services problems), and situational factors (e.g., bad weather, a strike, etc.) while perceptions are influenced by the result of the service delivery and external communication to the consumers. However, this approach is more related and applicable to single services, provided by different services operators, and does not consider the systemic nature of the company and the global perspective of analysis of the tourism experience (Mauri et al. 2013). Moreover, the satisfaction judgment comes from a subjective and emotional response to the various aspects of all the services provided (Otto and Ritchie 1995) that compose the overall tourism experience.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) propose a change of paradigm from the service delivery approach to the creation of an experience. According to the above-mentioned authors, people cannot have the same experience because it comes from the interactions (moments of truth) with the service providers (especially front office employees), and is influenced by the state of mind of each individual (emotional, physical, spiritual, and/or intellectual) and of other customers present during the service supply (Lehtinen and Lehtinen 1991; Lin et al. 2001; Orsingher 2003;

⁵ For a literature review of the tourist experience see Morgan et al. (2010). See also Volo (2009).

Ekinici and Dawes 2009). Therefore, tourist experience cannot be linked to a temporal dimension (Jennings 2006): expectations and perceptions are dynamic because they continue to change due to the interactions activated during the service supply and the influence of the competitive environment (Fournier and Mick 1999; Seth et al. 2005). The tourist constructs his or her personal experience combining subjectively the different fragments of the supply provided by the travel operators (Uriely 2005) during the whole travel process. Urry (1990) coined the term “tourism gaze” to describe how the tourists subjectively interpret the destination.

This new paradigm considers the experience as the result of a co-creation process⁶ in which all actors collaborate to value creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004).⁷ With the development of new technologies, this is no more only a result of a co-creation between the company and the consumer but it is increasingly affected by the relationship among consumers (Grönroos 2008).

Some authors in the past conceptualized the tourist experience as something in contrast with everyday life (Cohen 1979; Uriely 2005). Since the 1990s, the distinction between these two concepts has gradually decreased due to the development of new media and technologies (Neuhofer et al. 2013). In fact, Internet-based systems mediate the travel experience by means of user-generated content (UGC) that tourists can share (videos, photos, etc.). In this way, the tourism practice can be more and more accessible within everyday life without necessarily moving toward a specific destination (Jansson 2002; Uriely 2005; Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier 2009; Wang et al. 2012). Social media that allow sharing UGC operate as virtual “media of transportation” acting on imagination of tourists (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier 2009).

Jennings and Weiler (2006) identified two different kinds of mediators of the tourism experience: personal (i.e., other tourists, tourist providers, local governments, and communities) and nonpersonal (design, signage, esthetic, and settings). With the development of ICTs, researchers give more and more attention to new kinds of technology-based mediators generally connected to the Internet and to new devices: the well-known smartphones, digital cameras, and new mobile devices like Google Glass or Apple Watch (wearable devices). The UGC created by tourists around the world can be shared on social media and affects, in this way, the travel experience of other people. This can happen in all the steps of the travel process: in the planning phase, because a video can stimulate the traveler’s imagination about a destination; during the trip: when travelers are searching for interesting things to do at the destination or for sharing; and then at home, alone or with others, in the phase of recollection of the experience. Videos have been demonstrated to be mediators of travel experiences able to “generate a mental pleasure through imagination that bring to life people’s dreams and fantasies of visiting” a certain destination giving them also the opportunity to re-experiencing the past (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier 2009).

⁶ Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) define co-creation as the “practice of developing systems, products or services through collaboration with customers, managers, employees, and other company’s stakeholders” (cited by Ramaswamy and Gouillart 2010).

⁷ This new approach is the basis of some academic streams of research: co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004) and service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004).

Also Wang et al. (2012) underline the importance of new IT devices as mediators of travel experience. In particular, smartphones provide different kinds of services that can enrich the tourism experience in all the steps of the travel planning process. But the during-trip stage is generally the most influenced by location-based services (find restaurants, download Apps about the destination as a tourist guide, etc.) and entertainment services (share photos, videos, etc.) provided by mobile devices.

Next paragraph will examine in-depth the impacts of social media on the travel planning process, considering the temporal dimension of travel experience divided into: pre-trip (anticipatory), during-trip (experiential), and post-trip (reflective).

3.3 Social Media Influence on Travelers' Planning Process

Social media influence travelers in all the steps of the customer purchasing process (Schindler and Bickart 2005; Christou and Nella 2012), before, during, and after holidays, but with a different extent and diverse objectives (Fotis et al. 2012). Several recent academic studies have pointed out the impact of UGC on travelers decision-making and purchasing processes (Buhalis and Law 2008), especially with reference to information searching, holiday planning, and purchase decisions (Gretzel and Yoo 2008; Litvin et al. 2008; O'Connor 2008; Sidali et al. 2009; Vermeulen and Seegers 2009; Ye et al. 2009). A study of comScore (2013) found that, even if OTAs are the most visited websites during the travel process (80 % of travelers interviewed), 26 % of travel buyers were exposed to travel-related content on Facebook.

Before going on reading, consider that the propensity of people to use social media in various stages of travel planning can change according to cultural and age differences, as demonstrated by a few academic studies (Cox et al. 2009; Fotis et al. 2012; Wilson et al. 2012).

3.3.1 Pre-Trip Phase

The steps of the pre-trip phase lead the traveler to make decisions and create expectations about the upcoming tourism experience (Gretzel et al. 2006; Xiang et al. 2014). IT developments decrease search costs and increase the power of customers who can have a more active role during the decision process. Moreover, "traveler 2.0" (or "social traveler") is a multi-device customer because of the simultaneous use of an extensive range of technologies and devices (Parra-López et al. 2012; Xiang et al. 2014). In fact, more and more people combine PC and mobile devices, especially in the stage of travel information search (comScore 2013).

Despite social media influence on all the consumer behavior stages, a recent study of Google Think Insights (2013) on both leisure and business travelers' online activities shows a very high concentration of actions in the pre-trip phase. This is the ranking of top seven online activities of travelers interviewed:

1. research an upcoming trip;
2. read reviews from other travelers;
3. research a destination, flight, hotel, or vacation as a result of seeing an online ad;
4. brainstorm or start thinking about a trip;
5. watch a travel video;
6. request more information about an upcoming trip;
7. look at travel content or reviews by friends or family.

For what concerns the first step, the need recognition stage, social media can stimulate new ideas or influence the transformation process of a need in a specific desire. In the first case, Facebook, Twitter, or virtual communities can stimulate new travel ideas. A study of White (2010) demonstrates that travel-related photos generate an interest in friends that affects the travel plans. Another study of Fotis et al. (2012) confirms that social media in the pre-trip stage are mainly used to decide where to go and seek new ideas. For example, Pinterest in the settings options allows users to choose if receiving two kinds of emails: “stuff you may like” or “weekly inspiration.” Someone interested in travel could be inspired by a message about a new destination and then start gathering information about that. In other cases, someone could share online the need to “escape from every-day-life” on Facebook or Twitter and friends could suggest how to find satisfaction (e.g., a weekend in a wellness center). A recent study of Google/Ipsos (2013) found that 68 % of interviewees begin to search online before having decided the destination where to go.

After this first step, customers start looking for information. Social media play a key role in this step. In fact, recent academic studies confirm the importance of online reviews (eWOM), and in general UGC, during the step of travel planning (Gretzel 2007; Anderson 2012; Xiang et al. 2014) because they can be particularly useful source of information for travelers (Pan et al. 2007). This is true especially in case of infrequent decisions characterized by high customers' involvement and perception of risk, particularly when strong-tie sources of information are not available. In these cases, cognitive dissonance could occur and then travelers could invest more time in searching for information to reduce the perception of risk and dissonance (Tanford and Montgomery 2014). In these contexts, online comments, photos, and videos of other customers can help making decisions (Schindler and Bickart 2005). For example, in the case of a new destination, never visited before by the customer or by his or her friends, social networks and content communities become websites where the traveler can ask for other people experience. Sharing videos and pictures could decrease the perception of risk and positively influence the decision-making process. Moreover, also in this stage of information search, content communities like Pinterest and YouTube could be instruments to find inspiration for new potential destinations.⁸

⁸ Image content is used 37 % of the time during the travel decision process, which is more than twice as much as videos, at only 18 % (comScore 2013).

Generally, in the pre-trip stage customers look for information about accommodation and transportation (comScore 2013) but more and more Internet environment has become a place where people search also for other experiential travel products (attractions, shopping, and dining at the destination) (Fotis et al. 2012; Xiang et al. 2014). In this stage, customers' reviews about travel operators (accommodation, restaurants, destinations) are rich sources of information that help travelers to identify a certain group of alternatives, narrowing down choices (Fotis et al. 2012). The development of mobile technologies has moved in part this research to the during-trip phase, especially in the case of high experience customers or already known destinations (Jun et al. 2007). For example, if you know already the attractions in a specific destination, you can plan your activities when you arrive there (i.e., restaurants, museums, weather forecasts, etc.). Moreover, Global Positioning Systems (GPS) technologies allow customers to move easily when they arrive at the destination using maps and other Apps on their smartphones. This can reduce the necessity of finding information about local transportation, city guides, etc., before the departure. A recent study of Xiang et al. (2014) confirms an increasing number of people looking for information about the destination during the trip rather than in the phase of trip planning. However, recent studies confirm that information search about "activities to do" is a key issue both during the search of the destination and the consequent stages of travel planning (comScore 2013).

Information Technology (IT) has extended the amount of alternatives for travelers and the possibility to compare more easily the tourism offers. After having identified a set of alternatives, travelers compare them, trying to select the best choice. As said previously, hedonic/experiential goods like travel are characterized by high involvement and perception of risk. Moreover, sometimes customers can be exposed to cognitive dissonance if the information selected is inconsistent with their beliefs or simply in case of uncertainty about the choice made. In these cases, social media can play a key role in order to confirm the travel decision made (Fotis et al. 2012).

To compare alternatives customers can use transactional or nontransactional travel websites. Actually, nontransactional websites can have two different goals: reviewing and trip planning, and comparing the offers of different OTAs, airlines, hotels, etc. (meta-search) (Buhalis and O'Connors 2005). Every OTAs (Booking.com, Expedia, etc.), meta-search websites (i.e., Skyscanner, Trivago, Kajak, etc.), and social media/travel review websites (as TripAdvisor, Lonely Planet, etc.) can give useful information for travel decisions. Comparing, ratings, rankings, travelers' reviews, and visual content for each website and for each alternative, the traveler can come more precisely to a final decision. The main difference between OTAs and meta-search/travel review websites is the possibility for users to book directly the room. Meta-search and travel reviews websites are generally linked to OTAs or other travel operators where the transaction can be concluded. However, social media can affect customers' purchase decisions and transactions even though the final operation will be concluded on another website. In fact, TripAdvisor for example can influence and address the booking choices of customers by means of

the function “show prices” that compares prices of a few specific OTAs.⁹ At the same time, in the case of social networks like Facebook, a hotel corporate page could sometimes help customers in, not only interacting with the company, but also coming to final decisions (i.e., the option “book now”). In practice, they have a specific plug-in (that is very similar to the booking engine of the website) that gives users the opportunity to verify rooms availability in a specific period, than being transported to the website of the hotel only in case of actual booking/purchase.¹⁰ Moreover, the recent opportunity for customers to log-into TripAdvisor with the Facebook account allows them, during the stage of comparing alternatives, to identify possible feedbacks of friends included in their network. This can be very helpful to decrease the perception of risk and trust bias connected with eWOM, as explained in Chap. 2.

As mentioned in the first paragraph, after the travel choice (that sometimes is only a reservation and not a binding decision), we have a moment called post decision in which the traveler could change something or improve the organization of the journey. In the meanwhile, main activities involving social media could be searching for information to reassure themselves about the choice undertaken (customer reviews, ranking, ratings, etc.), or organizing activities at the destination (excursions and other leisure activities). During this phase, any unexpected situations or cognitive dissonance could influence travel planning with a few changes, especially in the case of nonbinding decisions (a free cancelation booking). A study of Fotis et al. (2012) found that a large majority of interviewees made some sort of changes to the original travel plan after having consulted online UGC.

The increasing trend to delay some kinds of travel decisions/purchases to the during-trip stage (especially for the “activities to do” at the destination), thanks to the development of mobile technologies, could be a risk for some travel companies. In fact, plans developed in the pre-trip stage could then change during the travel experience (Stewart and Vogt 1999; Jun et al. 2007). The ability of travel companies to convince customers purchasing the services since the pre-trip stage is a great opportunity. Social media could be useful instruments thanks to the large amount of people who search for information on the web. Some transactional websites are working in this direction by means of partnerships with other travel operators. For example, when customers book a flight on the website of some airlines (e.g., Ryanair, EasyJet) before concluding the purchase process, the airline will offer them to book other services such as accommodation, car rental, airport parking, etc. This is a clear attempt to optimize sales already in the pre-trip phase. The same occurs in the case of meta-search websites and social media. For example, Lonely Planet allows

⁹ Recently TripAdvisor allowed hotels that have a TripAdvisor corporate page to add business listings (address, e-mail, telephone number) and through TripConnect the rate of the hotel can be displayed in the section “show prices”. These new services can help hotel companies to increase direct bookings. For more information see <https://www.tripadvisor.com/TripConnect>.

¹⁰ The direct relationship with travelers, and therefore the opportunity to book directly starting the process from a social media, is a great opportunity for companies because decreases the amount of commission to be paid to OTAs and other costs of distribution (Noone and Andrews 2000).

travelers to plan and purchase hotels, flights, car rentals, adventure tours, sightseeing tours, and insurance by means of specific partnerships with Booking.com, Kayak,¹¹ major car rental operators, WorldNomads.com,¹² and some local travel companies. The traveler, after having planned the service and consulted ratings, rankings, and other community users' reviews, can check availability and book the services also paying in advance on the specific travel partner website.

3.3.2 *During-Trip Phase*

Travelers continue to search for information and make decisions also during the trip. As mentioned before, with the development of mobile technologies the pre-trip and the post-trip stages can overlap thanks also to the increasing opportunity for tourists to be connected to the Internet during the journey. In fact, airports, hotels, transportation, restaurants, and entire destinations more and more allow customers to connect to the Net for free.

Travelers generally use multiple devices during the various stages of travel planning, but during the trip we notice a growing importance of mobile devices (especially smartphones) (Expedia, ComScore-Expedia Media Solutions 2013). Main activity is generally search for information about: weather/climate, restaurants/reviews, activities to do (Expedia, comScore 2013).¹³ Searching for information on social media during the trip can also have the objective to reduce the perception of risk and increase the perception of safety (Schroeder and Pennington-Gray 2014). Especially, business travelers use mobile Apps and websites to take real-time decisions about transportation, hotels, restaurants, etc. For example the App "Tonight" of Booking.com and "Hotel tonight" were created with the objective of satisfying the need of travelers to rapidly identify a hotel nearby. The booking engine of the App is already set on "tonight" and users have only to decide the ranking according to popularity, proximity, price, and rating. But a vast range of location-based mobile Apps allow tourists to take real-time decisions about various services at the destination. Foursquare, for example, locates services nearby the user who can share the position to his or her friends by means of the function "check-in."¹⁴

But the diffusion of mobile technologies has particularly affected the possibility for people to create context-related information (Buhalis and Foerste 2013) and to share real-time experience (Qualman 2009; Litvin 2008). Social media and short messages

¹¹ Kayak, being a meta-search site, will compare the fares of different airlines and OTAs.

¹² WorldNomads.com is a travel insurance company launched in 2002 that provides services for independent travelers (<http://www.worldnomads.com/>).

¹³ Even if the percentage changes slightly according to the kind of customer behavior considered, this information is generally the most searched during the trip.

¹⁴ On Foursquare if you check-in in the same place/company you become frequent user and obtain also more points/badges that certify which kind of traveler you are.

service (SMS) allow people to share text, photos, and videos. Social networks are particularly suitable for these activities, in fact, many of them ask users generally to share “what they are doing in that moment” with the network of friends. When traveling, all days are full of new experiences to share: a post on Facebook or a new pin on Pinterest with the photos of the gorgeous typical dish you are tasting, or the beautiful view you are watching at. Tourism activities are highly related to visual content (photos and videos) that, when sent by mobile phones or posted on social media, become a sort of “new postcard.” However, Munar and Jacobsen (2014) found that old and new technologies sometimes overlap. In fact, in their study “old postcards” and “new-postcards” were equally used by travelers for holiday greetings.¹⁵ But “old postcards” convey new social meanings connected to: having a tangible souvenir that reminds the travelers’ the experience and the destination (Gordon 1986), or creating an emotional link that lasts in time with families and friends.¹⁶ A paper postcard of a beautiful holiday location could also be tangible evidence to represent a status and stimulate envy in other people (Pine and Gilmore 1998).

Another sharing activity of travelers during the trip is posting online reviews on travel review websites, such as TripAdvisor, giving scores, publishing photos and describing the experience. These activities could be a great opportunity for hotels that generally host the traveler for at least one night. For example, in case of a complaint the hotel staff could promptly intervene trying a service recovery when the customer is still at the hotel. However, this means a real-time management of social media by employees in charge of this task.

Despite a few studies pointed out a major use of social media during the pre-trip stage for searching information (Cox et al. 2009) and during post-trip phase for sharing activities (Fotis et al. 2012), recent research underlines the increasing importance of social media in the during-trip step of the travel planning process mainly due to the development of mobile technology (Munar and Jacobsen 2014; Xiang et al. 2014). This means a progressive move of some travel decisions from the pre-trip stage and the post-trip stage to the during-trip phase.

3.3.3 *Post-Trip Phase*

According to a recent report of comScore (2013), 45 % of travelers after the trip post travel-related content on social media and write online reviews. Multiple devices (especially laptops and smartphones) are used at the same time to publish photos and videos on social media, while the main device used to write a review is the laptop.

¹⁵ The study was conducted on a sample of Scandinavian travelers coming back from Mallorca.

¹⁶ We have also to consider that not all the people use new technologies or have a smartphone (for example elder people). Therefore, travelers could desire to send to or to take home a picture for the grandparents.

After coming back home, travelers evaluate the quality of the whole travel experience and develop an overall customer satisfaction judgment. This evaluation could determine the action of posting a review online on specific websites (e.g., travel review websites as TripAdvisor¹⁷) for one or more services availed during the trip. In some cases, customers are also stimulated by means of an email sent by the service provider or an intermediary a few days after the comeback. For example, OTAs send an email asking a quality evaluation to the customer about the experience: a questionnaire that asks customers to give a score for each service provided with a section where travelers can upload their photos and videos. Another example is that of TripAdvisor that provides companies (only those with a corporate page) with specific functions aimed at stimulating the publication of online reviews.

Despite the increase of real-time sharing during the trip, thanks to the improvements of Internet connectivity at the destination, sharing activities can continue also after the trip. The cited study of Fotis et al. (2012) on Internet users from Russia and the former Soviet Union Republics shows that 78 % of them share content on social media in the post-trip phase. In the same way, Murphy et al. (2010) found that the majority of young travelers interviewed usually share UGC about the trip on social media (Facebook) in the post-trip stage.

Facebook and Twitter could be helpful media to extend the effects of holidays in everyday life, sometimes with a little bit of sadness. In other cases, tourists use social networks to interact with the company sharing good UGC, this could be a sort of award for the company, or a way for complaining. In this last case, a proper complaint management processes is essential for a successful customer care (Kaplan and Haenlein 2011). The interaction with customers in this stage on social media, if properly managed, can be an opportunity to make a client loyal, developing a long-term relationship. The Sect. 3.4.3 will study more in-depth the motivations for sharing UGC and in general for spreading eWOM.

3.4 Sharing Travel Experiences on Social Media

3.4.1 *Tourism Experience and Storytelling*

During their travel experience tourists hear and create their own stories that then, in turn, can be told to (shared with) others as memories. In the tourism system, stories can be produced at different levels: stories of residents (traditions, heritage, etc.), of destinations (history, culture, etc.), of the tourist staff (employees, tour guides, etc.), and of other tourists at the destination (Moscardo 2010). The action of telling stories is called storytelling and has been defined by The National Storytelling Network as “the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a

¹⁷ The TripAdvisor case has been described in Sect. 2.7.1.

story while encouraging the listener's imagination."¹⁸ According to this definition, storytelling "involves a two-way interaction between a storyteller and one or more listeners." Therefore, listeners have an active role, being co-creators of the story, because they actually create the story in their mind on the basis of the performance of the teller filtered by their personal features (past experience, beliefs, etc.).

Research on storytelling in tourism focuses mainly on two areas: a management approach that studies how travel operators and destinations can employ stories to improve marketing strategies and branding (Hsu et al. 2009; Woodside et al. 2007, Woodside 2010), and a customer approach that investigates how stories can influence the tourists' choices, and the role played by stories told by other tourists, especially with the development of Web 2.0 and social media (Litvin 2008; Kozinets et al. 2010). In this paragraph, we will focus especially on this second stream of research, trying to understand the link existing between word-of-mouth and storytelling and the prerequisites that transform a travel experience in a story to be told.

Word-of-mouth and storytelling are concepts considered at the origin of folklore, religion, and myth, therefore telling stories is one of the most ancient ways to transfer contents from one person to another (Denning 2006; Sassoon 2012). However, word-of-mouth, as defined in Chap. 2, could sometimes simply concern telling factual and informative contents (i.e., telling others which is the best airport for that destination, or the right season to visit it). In these cases, WOM cannot be considered storytelling. However, some scholars found that generally WOM communication is expressed in the narrative form of a story (Delgado and Escalas 2004). This structure creates surprise and emotional engagement that, in turn, produce a discourse about the tourism experience rather than a mere person-to-person recommendation (Solnet et al. 2010; Fontana 2013). Moreover, the repetitive positive WOM about a travel experience (that includes obviously destinations, travel operators, etc.) can actually become a "story" (folklore) that can be told by anyone, even someone who had never had that experience (Solnet et al. 2010).

With the development of ICTs in the tourism sector, we notice the proliferation of these narrative discourses on social media; they are travel stories that create meanings combining texts, images, and videos (travel blogs and communities, Facebook, etc.).¹⁹ Travelers can at first listen to stories by other tourists or travel operators, etc. and then perform and create their own. These first-hand stories can then be shared with other people during the trip and in the post-trip stage, influencing other travelers' behavior and affecting the brand image of the tourism operators and/or destination. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the presence of a first-hand experience is perceived as a cue of the message validity and credibility (Schindler and Bickart 2005; Doh et al. 2009). According to Hsu et al. (2009), "first-hand visitor reports of experiencing destinations indicate that tourists

¹⁸ For further insights see <http://www.storynet.org/resources/whatisstorytelling.html>. Accessed April 2014.

¹⁹ The practice of telling a story combining narrative, images, music, voice, supported by means of digital media is defined Digital storytelling (Lambert 2013).

tell stories that offer clues of how they interpret and enact the myth that these destinations enable”. But to become an experience that travelers desire to tell, obviously it has to be registered in their memory (the autobiographical memory).²⁰ This process can be very different from one person to the other considering some demographical aspects such as age, gender, stage of the life cycle, etc. Tung and Ritchie (2011) identified four dimensions which enable experiences to become memorable:

- *affect*, concerns the valence of the experience: positive emotions and feelings are more recalled by negative ones. Starting from positive emotions, travelers are more likely to provide more details about their experience;
- *expectations*, a not planned, unexpected event (a surprise) can reinforce the recall of a certain experience;
- *consequentiality*, refers to the possible results of the trip. For example: social relations created during the experience (e.g., friendship, love), intellectual development acquired thanks to the visit (e.g., learning the history and the culture of a destination), self-discovery (e.g., a change in the state of mind of the traveler after the experience occurred during the trip), and overcoming physically challenges (e.g., developing skills and expertise in a sport);
- *recollection*, refers to the effort made by travelers to remember the tourism experiences. They can help themselves with a photograph, a video, a story, a souvenir, etc.

Therefore, a memorable and engaging experience can be easily recovered from the memory becoming narratives of a storytelling activity.

Moreover, as mentioned before, the increasing opportunity to connect to social media during the trip, thanks to mobile technologies, encourages instant sharing of travelers’ stories that, in turn, can produce real-time feedbacks of friends, eventually changing “the story” (suggesting maybe new activities and interpretations of the tourism experience) (Kozinets et al. 2010). This concept is called Mobile storytelling that can be defined as “the structured and shared presentation of visual material produced with a mobile device, supplemented by text and/or music and sound” (Klastrup 2007).²¹ People, through mobile devices, can tell and share “small stories” about their lives. But the development of Mobile storytelling lead to a new interpretation of “interactivity” with a story, different from that intended within the traditional concept of Storytelling. Namely, in this case, the narrative co-creation is not only the result of a process that the listener activates in his or her mind filtering the story on the basis of personal features. Mobile storytelling entails that the

²⁰ Brewer (1986) defines autobiographical memory as “the subset of human memory related to the self... organized in terms of frequency of experience, and imaginal properties of the representation...”.

²¹ The study of Klastrup (2007) shows an increasing trend of creating stories around available content (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) rather than around “real” experience.

narrative is produced by means of multiple social interactions and a co-creation among people generally of various groups (i.e., the friends on Facebook) generating a “dialogue of stories” (Klastrup 2007).

Finally, we notice the development of the so-called Transmedia storytelling²² that concerns the action of telling stories across multiple media platforms (Jenkins et al. 2006). The narrative structure develops through various languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (TV, smartphones, Internet, video games, etc.) (Scolari 2009), changing accordingly.

3.4.2 The Dimensions of Co-Creation Through Technology

The increasing use of technology during the travel planning process, especially in the during-trip stage, and a more and more interconnected tourist, affect the way experience is created. Co-creation is no more related to a process that involves the company, the customer, and other consumers at the destination but also people at home or based elsewhere should be seriously taken into account. In fact, the opportunity to share UGC allows tourists to be connected with their social network of friends and with the family, being influenced by their responses and comments.

Tourists can co-create their experience through technology at different levels. A study of Neuhofer et al. (2013) identified six dimensions of co-creation, considering the grade of involvement and the social intensity of the connection: social connectedness, social intercommunication, social interaction, co-participation, and co-living. A key prerequisite for co-creating travel experiences through technology is the opportunity to be connected (social connectedness). Tourists maintain their social relationship with the network (family, friends), even if physically in another place, by using various mobile devices. Actually, this could also be interpreted as interference in the tourism experience. In fact, some travelers prefer to be socially disconnected during the tourism activity in order to live an authentic experience different from everyday life. Anyway, in case of social connectedness, tourists can be linked with people at home or based elsewhere in different ways: from a more light contact based on messaging (social intercommunication) to a more intense dialog in which both sides create and exchange meaning (social interaction). The authors identified also a deeper level of connection between tourists and online social networks that increases the intensity of co-creation of the tourism experience. In this case, technology represents the facilitator media that allows travelers a real-time sharing of what is happening with people of the online social network that become co-participants of the travel experience (co-participation). Sometimes, sharing activity is so intense that people at home or based elsewhere are not only participants but live the experience through

²² Other scholars describe the same concept with other names. Among others we find for example cross media storytelling (Bechmann Petersen 2006).

the eyes of the tourist (co-living). An example of this last case could be a video call during a concert that allows people at home to see part of the show, living real-time the same emotions of the friend that is physically present.

3.4.3 Motivations for Sharing Travel Experience

A work of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) pointed out the motives that drive customers to spread word-of-mouth online, combining economic and social activities within virtual communities. They identified five main motivational categories: focus-related utility, consumption utility, approval utility, moderator-related utility, and homeostasis utility.²³ A recent study of Munar and Jacobsen (2014) reviews the literature on the topic related to motivations for sharing tourism experience and identified three main reasons: individual action and personal cognition, self-centered motivations, and community-related motivations.

Therefore, on the basis of these previous studies, we can identify two main groups of motivations for spreading the travel experience online: community-related and self-centered motivations.

The first group is related to the purpose of adding value to the community. It comprehends the concern for others (Engel et al. 1993), that is the intention of travelers to help other customers (altruism) telling them about their favorable experience (Sundaram et al. 1998; Cheng et al. 2006; Yoo and Gretzel 2011), as well as the intention to “to give something in return” to the company for the good experience (Sundaram et al. 1998; Cheung and Lee 2012). Another reason for consumers to engage in eWOM is the need of social integration and of belonging to a community (McWilliam 2012; Qu and Lee 2011; Cheung and Lee 2012). In fact, the level of online interaction and engagement of people changes also according to how they perceive themselves in relation to other members. As stated by Lee et al. (2012), individuals with interdependent self-construal perceive themselves in connection with others and part of a larger community. Therefore, they are more likely to engage and interact with community members but differently conformity to the kind of brand community: in consumer-brand communities, the intent is related to brand likability and interpersonal relationships while in marketer-brand communities, the main objectives are brand liability, convenience seeking, and incentive seeking (coupons) (Lee et al. 2012). The sense of belonging generated by means of the active participation in a travel community can increase the action of knowledge sharing (Qu and Lee 2011). Moreover, online word-of-mouth gives the opportunity to people to exert a collective power over companies (i.e., criticism and complaints). In this case, negative feedbacks refer to unfavorable experiences and are meant to dissuade other people from buying that product. Customers can have

²³ Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) developed their analysis started from the dimensions identified by Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) and added homeostasis utility.

an attitude of aggressive complaint or a more moderate behavior trying to alert other consumers for the risk of that product (Cheng et al. 2006).

The second group of reasons for sharing travel experiences concerns individual, self-centered motivations. Online sharing could have the objective of gaining respect and recognition (approval utility). In this case, customers who post a comment desire to have an informal or formal approval on their feedbacks usefulness. Informal approval derives from private or public online conversations while formal approval is granted by a ranking system that assigns a score or a status to each reviewer (i.e., top or expert contributor) according to the usefulness of the feedback. Reasons of this behavior could be a self-enhancement motivation, based on the need to gain a reputation on a consumer opinion platform (Lampel and Bhalla 2007; Gretzel and Yoo 2008; Munar 2010), or on the intention to obtain a reward from the operator that manages the platform, generally an economic benefit.

Sometimes travelers desire to have a third-party actor that mediates his interactions with the companies (i.e., staff members for complaints management) or want to stimulate others to give advice on a certain topic. In this last case, the main objective is saving time and costs of holiday planning (functional benefits) (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004). Customers could also have the intent to restore balance to extremely satisfactory experience (positive comment) or, on the contrary, extremely dissatisfactory experiences (negative feedback). Therefore, eWOM communications may have the objective to share joy with other people or to reduce frustration (social benefits). A recent study found that sense of belonging, enjoyment of helping others, and reputation are the reasons that have an high impact on the customer intention of spreading online WOM (Cheung and Lee 2012). Finally, a strong reason for creating UGC is also hedonism: to have pleasure and fun interacting with other people (Nonnecke et al. 2004; Parra-López et al. 2012).²⁴ However, according to various studies of Yoo and Gretzel (2008, 2011) travelers' income level, nationality, culture, age, involvement, as well as personality are key factors that influence travelers' social media use and engagement.

3.5 Social Media Users

3.5.1 *Lurkers and Posters*

Online community participants are commonly divided by existing research into two groups: posters, who actively participate in the community, and lurkers, who read content but never post.

Despite the growing importance of UGC, the academic literature shows that a large part of social media users are lurkers: they are not able or motivated to create

²⁴ Parra-López et al. (2012) identify three motivations to use social media: functional, social and hedonic benefits.

and share their experiences online. In fact, a study of Yoo and Gretzel (2012) on online travelers found that only 20 % of them have ever posted contents online. A report of Vision Critical (2013) found that 64 % of Facebook users are lurkers because they post less than 5 times per week (26 % of them have posted less than 10 times in the past year).

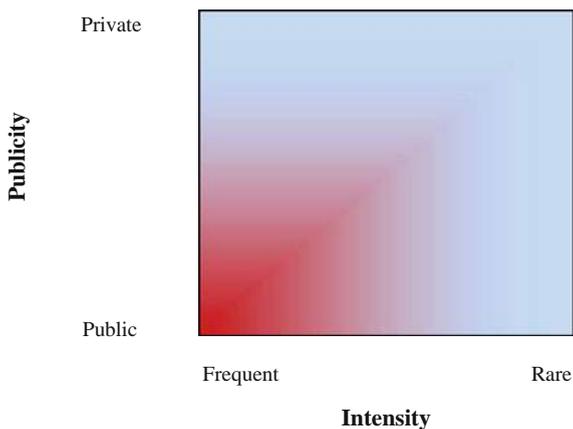
Nonnecke and Preece (2003) define lurkers as “anyone who reads but seldom if ever publicly contributes to an online group”. The action of lurking is possible in public newsgroups and communities, where a formal registration is not required and anyone can access to the content, as well as on social networks, where people can create a profile and then look at online content of friends or colleagues without interacting or creating.

Research shows that it is hard to find a shared definition of lurkers according to the frequency of activity on the community. They have been classified as passive or active but differently according to various approaches. Bowes (2002) defines passive lurkers as people who only read but never participate, and active lurkers as people who at first read and then respond privately to messages posted. Another approach is that of Walker et al. (2010) who classify lurkers into passive and active considering the frequency of activity on the community (how many times people logged into on a certain online community).

Leshed (2005) proposed a model that represents online community behaviors according to two dimensions: publicity represents the degree of exposure in a participant’s activity (posting vs. reading), and intensity identifies the frequency of participants’ activities using a time measurement (frequent vs. rare). On the basis of this model, we suppose that newcomers of online communities at first will lurk in a private environment. Hereafter, they could decide to increase the intensity of participation, the degree of exposure, or both the dimensions at the same time (Fig. 3.2).

Research on the topic found that a minority of lurkers are completely passive, intending to lurk from the outset (Nonnecke et al. 2004). Therefore, this attitude is determined generally by other reasons that can be grouped into four categories

Fig. 3.2 A model of online community behaviors. *Source* Leshed (2005). With kind permission for Lawrence Erlbaum Associates



(Nonnecke and Preece 2001). First, it can depend on the member's personal character: the user could be shy or prefer to remain anonymous for privacy or safety reasons. Sometimes the barriers for posting depend on users' grade of expertise or on the relationship that occurs with the social group: he could be novice to the virtual group and therefore feel a lack of expertise to respond. Otherwise users think of not having something to say or find the feedback already in responses given to others. Second, reasons for lurking could depend on the characteristics of the community: among others, a community environment of poor quality (content) or hard to use (usability), delay in responses, aggressive behavior toward newcomers, or simply a lack of a direct request to post, can disincentive people to participate. Third, the propensity to lurk can change during the membership stages: at first users could dedicate some time to learn about the group before starting to post²⁵ or, if they understand that the community is not interesting for them, before leaving the community. Fourth, external constraints could influence users: for example, to have not enough time or specific work conditions.

Among all these possible reasons, a study of Nonnecke et al. (2004) pointed out that main explanations for lurking are connected with personal features and the membership stage. In fact, top five reasons identified are (Preece et al. 2004): I prefer just to read/for me it is enough (53.9 %), I'm still learning about the group (29.7 %), I'm shy about posting (28.3 %), and I've nothing to offer (22.8 %). Several motivations were also connected to the ability of the group to create the prerequisites for participating. In fact, in the ranking, we find also an item referred to the lack of requirement to post by the group (21.5 %). Other items, in lower positions of the ranking, are instead connected with the way the community is managed. This means that maybe a better management of the group could offer more opportunities to encourage lurkers to participate. Finally, a study of Gretzel et al. (2007) conducted in the travel sector found that time constraints, lack of interest, and lack of confidence are the main barriers in creation of UGC.

In general, lurkers have mainly a lesser sense of community in comparison with posters (79.2 vs 26.3%); they think to be able to satisfy their needs without directly participating in the community. As a result, they express a lower level of satisfaction compared with posters (Nonnecke et al. 2004). The study of Yoo and Gretzel (2012) pointed out that there is no difference between lurkers and posters in the travel sector in terms of gender, education level, and income. On the contrary, social creators are generally younger than lurkers, they are more likely single and employed full-time (Yoo and Gretzel 2012).²⁶ However, research findings on the

²⁵ This period is called by Lee et al. (2006) "zone of lurking" that is, the transition between willing to login and being able to post.

²⁶ A Forrester report (Band and Petouhoff 2010) proposes a classification of posters in: creators, critics and collectors. Creators upload video/audio, publish content, post stories, etc. Critics post ratings and reviews, comment on blogs, contribute to articles on wikis, etc. Collectors are less active: they use RSS feed, add tags to web pages or photos, etc. Other levels of the so-called "The Social Technographics® Ladder" are: joiners, spectators, inactives.

topic are sometimes contradictory due to pattern of use differences according to the type of social media considered.²⁷

Due to the high number and variety of existing social media, users can play different roles at the same time: they can be both lurkers and posters according to the specific social medium. Furthermore, regardless the type of social media, the user may have a diverse level of engagement with the company, the brand, and/or the product. In practice, social media users can be lurkers on LinkedIn and posters on Facebook, or lurkers on a brand community and posters on another.

Given that only a small part of lurkers have no intention to participate in the community from the outset, and that sometimes other barriers determine a lack of interaction, companies could encourage lurkers to participate in their online communities acting on intensity and publicity (Fig. 3.2). On the one hand, firms could try to increase the frequency of participants' activities in the community (for example, publishing engaging posts that create interest). On the other hand, companies could attempt to enhance users' degree of exposure from private to public (for example, asking people to publish the best photo of their holidays). Corporate actions aimed at improving the users' state from lurkers to posters could help overcoming the aforementioned barriers and fears (Bishop 2011) in order to increase users' engagement, enhance positive word-of-mouth, and possibly influence sales. Furthermore, active and exposed community members provide useful information about interests, preferences, and demographics that the company can use to improve and refine market segmentation.

Besides, users' pattern of use of online communities will develop according to the ability of the company to create opportunities of interaction and engagement and sense of belonging to the community.

3.5.2 *Social Shoppers*

The previous paragraph has identified different roles of social media users on the basis of the degree of exposure and frequency of participants' activity. Another possible dimension of analysis of social media users is the propensity to buy. Earlier in this chapter, we have considered social media influence on consumers' behavior and decision making (including purchase decisions). Therefore, social media users are often shoppers. But how can we define a social media shopper? A possible approach is to consider, *sensu stricto*, a social media user as a shopper when the purchase is completed through the social media application (i.e., the corporate Facebook page of a brand). For example, a recent study of PwC (2013) follows this approach and reveals that just 12 % of social media users have purchased an item through social media. Major position in the academic literature

²⁷ The following Sect. 3.5.3 will examine the different users' profiles according to the most popular social media.

considers a social shopper any social media user influenced by the information learned or by the interactions activated on social media who then purchase the product on social media, on another website, or offline in a physical store (*sensu latu*) (Liang et al. 2011; Yadav et al. 2013; Zhou et al. 2013).²⁸

In the present analysis, we share this last approach. On support to this perspective, a recent investigation of Vision Critical (2013) found that 4 in 10 social media users have purchased an item online or in-store after sharing or favoring it on Twitter, Facebook, or Pinterest (38 % of Facebook users, 29 % of Pinterest users, and 22 % of Twitter) (Vision Critical 2013). In particular, Pinterest is the social media that more likely drives spontaneous purchases both online and in-store sales.²⁹ According to Sevitt and Samuel (2013), 41 % of social media users practice the so-called “reverse showrooming,” that is the trend of customers who browse online, and buy offline.³⁰ In fact, on the total amount of people who have purchased a product after sharing or favoring it on the social network, a remarkable part have preferred to purchase in-store (30 % Facebook, 21 % Pinterest, 17 % Twitter).

Some studies identify many profiles of social media users. The survey of PwC (2013) pointed out three behaviors of social media users: brand lovers, deal hunters, and social addicted. Some of them are deeply connected with purchase activity. There is an increasing number of “brand lovers” that follow their favorite brands on social media (38 % in 2012; 33 % in 2011). Among them 53 % go shopping in a physical store daily or weekly and 45 % reports that they make an online purchase once a week, but they are multiple-channel shoppers. In this case, it is clear that even if social media users do not buy directly on the social media page they are loyal customers of the brand. Therefore, the social media communication strategy of a company could affect directly sales. These kind of social media users are interested in new products of the brand (28 %) because they want to try them (17 %) but they are obviously interested also in interacting with the brand (9 %) and with other followers (7 %). The second group of social media users is called “deal hunters.” They are looking for good offers, attractive deals, promotions, and sales (49 %), some of them are also interested in opportunities to participate to contests (16 %). Some analyses conducted in the travel industry confirm that travelers generally compare more than one website to be sure to choose the best deal of the day (PhocusWright 2013) and that multiple channels are considered before deciding

²⁸ Generally, the term social shopping or social commerce is used to describe a new way of commerce mediated by social media that benefits both consumers and firms (Curry and Zhang 2011). It deals with a combination of social media and commercial activities that allows consumers to make decisions interacting with other customers and with firms by means of various social media (Liang et al. 2011; Yadav et al. 2013).

²⁹ The study of Vision Critical (2013) found that sometimes Pinterest users create boards specifically for a purchase decision.

³⁰ The concept “reverse showrooming” is the opposite of the so-called “showrooming” defined by Sevitt and Samuel (2013) as “a phenomenon whereby shoppers visit stores to examine merchandise in person before buying the items online—is viewed as a huge threat to brick-and-mortar retailing”. The study was conducted on nearly 3,000 social media users in North America and the UK.

to purchase (NetComm, Human Highway, Politecnico di Milano 2013).³¹ The third category of social media users identified by the PwC report is “social addicts”. They are very active, definitively they are posters, with generally a very large network of friends. Main motivations for visiting the brand on social media are: interacting with friends or experts for recommendations (26 %), interacting with friends that love that brand and with the brand at the same time (17 %), obtaining feedbacks about a good or bad experience (11 %), searching for products before buying them (9 %), and access to the brand customer service (5 %). This profile maybe is not that of a heavy shopper but of users who, with their behavior, can have a particular influence on the company’s reputation.

Vision Critical (2013) identifies main features that distinguish social shoppers from other social media users. They are young (51 % aged 18–34) and rather equally distributed between men (56 %) and women (44 %). Generally, they are more active and visible Facebook users, and very influential on friend’s purchase choices. They pay attention to value-for-money comparing different offers and stores before purchasing also by means of mobile devices when they are in the store. On the basis of these results, three profiles (tribes) of social shoppers are detected: thinkers, questers and leapers. Thinkers have already thought about purchasing a specific or a similar product and are contemplating about the purchase on social media. Questers have already thought about a specific purchase and use social media to look for it. Leapers have not thought about a specific purchase and are inspired by social media to make purchases. Facebook is the most used social media by Thinkers (60 %) and Questers (24 %) while Pinterest is the most used by Leapers (29 %).

From the results of the previous reports we notice that both lurkers and posters could at the same time be shoppers. Next chapter will propose some strategies to engage social media users with the purpose of encouraging lurkers to actively participate in the community in order to enhance word-of-mouth activity and influence their purchase decisions.

3.5.3 Social Media Users Demographics

Due to the proliferation of social media characterized by diverse frameworks, and variation across consumer demographics, for companies is increasingly important to comprehend popularity, type of users’ profiles, and pattern of use for each media.

Facebook is confirmed to be the dominant social network in both the Web and mobile (Nielsen 2014). A recent study of Pew Research Center (2013) in the U.S. found that 73 % of online adults use a social networking site of some kind and 71 % use Facebook. However, 42 % of online adults use multiple social media platforms.

³¹ The survey “Il Futuro del Commercio” (2013) was commissioned by eBay to NetComm, Human Highway, Politecnico di Milano.

Facebook and Instagram seem to be the most engaging social media: 63 % of Facebook and 57 % of Instagram users log in daily. Other very popular social media resulted from the study are: Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Twitter.³² According to Nielsen (2014), Pinterest and Instagram have grown significantly in 2013.

Facebook is used by a diverse mix of demographic groups even though in 2013 people aged from 45 to 54 have increased (+45 %) (BI Intelligence 2013). Other social media have more specific demographic profiles of users. For example, Pinterest is very popular among women (Nielsen 2012) with a college degree or higher and generally high income level. Another social media loved by women is Instagram (68 %) (BI Intelligence 2013). On the contrary, Google + and YouTube are generally preferred by men. The social network for professionals (LinkedIn) is very appealing for adults (it is also the only case for which usage among 50–64 years old people is higher than usage among those aged 18–29) with a college degree or higher, high income level (Pew Research Center 2013), and generally men (BI Intelligence 2013). Young people prefer to share content (text, images, audio, and links) on Tumblr (BI Intelligence 2013).

These demographic trends, that are very dynamic and change with the proliferation of new social media, along with previous statistics about social shopping, could be useful for organizations to better evaluate their audience developing specific social media strategies.

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³² The study conducted by PewResearchCenter (2013) was referred to a subset of social media and did not include other media like Youtube and Google+.

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