The Battle Of The Socials: Which Socially Symbolic Factors Best Predict Intent To Travel?

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Abstract

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The battle of the socials: Which socially symbolic factors best predict intent to travel?

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ABSTRACT

Tourists are flooded with travel options making competition fierce within their consideration sets. While most research emphasizes the functional attributes of destinations, as narcissism becomes more normalized, it is of increasing interest to examine the influence socially symbolic factors have on tourist decision making. Therefore, this study sought to examine the efficacy of four different socially symbolic predictors of travel—social norms, social self-concept (actual and ideal), and social return—for predicting a person's likelihood to travel to Cuba across three time horizons (1 year, 5 years, and 10 years). Results from a panel of 785 U.S. travelers found social norms to be the best predictor of travel across all three time horizons with social return also being significant across all time horizons. Implications to destination marketing are discussed such as some socially symbolic variables being easier to operationalize in marketing campaigns compared to others (e.g. social return vs. social norms).

In today's market, consumers are flooded with a variety of travel options, which makes competition for the few slots within a tourist's consideration set fierce (Karl, Reintinger, & Schmude, 2015; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). While many theories regarding tourism decision making emphasize the importance of the functional attributes of tourism destinations such as service quality and the natural and cultural resources of the destination (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003), interest is developing in the role symbolic factors have on influencing tourism behavior (Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Preciado, 2013). Dimanche and Samdahl (1994, p. 121) write that, "It is apparent that both leisure and consumption have a symbolic nature that represents something much greater than either the activity or the purchase." Ekinci et al. (2013, p. 711) describe symbolic consumption as occurring "when consumers choose, buy, and use products to assist individuals in the creation, confirmation, and communication of their identity." As narcissism in travel becomes more normalized (Canavan, 2017), it is of increasing interest to examine the influence these socially symbolic factors have on tourist decision making.

Three socially symbolic constructs of interest are social self-congruity (Sirgy & Su, 2000), social return (Boley, Jordan, Kline, & Knollenberg, 2018), and social norms (Jordan, Boley, Knollenberg, & Kline, 2018). Social self-congruity has two components—actual social self-congruity and ideal social self-congruity. It is a measure of how closely a destination's brand image relates to the way a person believes society sees them (actual) or how they would like to be seen by society (ideal) (Chon, 1992). Social return is the anticipated positive social media feedback tourists expect their shared pictures of the destination to have (Boley et al., 2018). Social norms are the "customary rules that govern behavior in groups and societies" (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2011, March 01) and act as a positive or negative motivation for travel based on each person's perception of how their chosen group of significant others will perceive the morality of their choice to travel to a destination.

While these three measure have all been independently shown to influence tourist intent to visit destinations in separate studies (Boley et al., 2018; Jordan et al., 2018; Sirgy & Su, 2000), they have yet to be considered in tandem to determine which is the best socially symbolic predictor of intent to travel. With this in mind, this study seeks to examine the efficacy of four different socially symbolic predictors of travel—social norms, social self-congruity (actual and ideal), and social

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return—for predicting a person's likelihood to travel to Cuba over the course of three different time horizons (e.g., within the next 12 months, 5 years, and 10 years). By determining which socially symbolic construct best predicts intent to travel, as well as how these symbolic variables fluctuate in importance across time, it will help destination managers know exactly how, and at what time, they should tailor their marketing and advertising efforts. Examining the predictive validity of these four constructs also has implications for future modeling of tourism behavior given space limitations on questionnaires and the ever-decreasing attention spans of survey respondents.

1. Methods

The four socially symbolic constructs were administered in to an online panel of 758 U.S. travelers provided by the global market research firm *Issues and Answers* in April 2016. Online panels from reputable market research firms have been found to be reliable and lacking in response bias that is common to other data collection methods (Jordan et al., 2018). The panel was limited to U.S. residents whom were over 18, had traveled over 50 miles from their home in the past year, and have annual household incomes over $50,000 a year. These thresholds were included to ensure that the sample was in fact reflective of the U.S. travel market. The constructs of social self-congruity, social norms, and social return were adopted from previous literature and measured using 7-point Likert scales. Intent to travel was measured using a single question asking travelers how likely they were to visit Cuba in the next year, 5 years, or 10 years. To eliminate dependency between the three time horizons, survey respondents who indicated that they planned to travel to Cuba within the next year were removed from five year and ten year models, and those who indicated that they planned to travel to Cuba within five years were removed from the ten year model. This resulted in 758 respondents for the year 1 model, 632 respondents for the five year model, and 502 respondents for the ten year model. IBM's AMOS software was employed for confirmatory factor analysis to assess convergent and discriminant validity and structural equation modeling to test the structure relationships between the socially symbolic constructs and intent to travel to Cuba across the three time horizons in line with previous studies examining factors that predict intention to visitation a destination (Bianchi & Milberg, 2017; Boley et al., 2018; Molinillo, Liébana-Cabanillas, Anaya-Sánchez, & Buhalis, 2018).

2. Results and discussion

The CFA demonstrated strong convergent and discriminant validity based upon each construct having high regression coefficients (> 0.70), Average Variance Explained (AVEs) scores above 50%, and squared correlations between constructs lower than their individual AVEs (See Tables 1 & 2). SEM results revealed that across all three time horizons, social norms were the best predictor of intent to travel. Within the first model, social norms, actual social self-concept and social return were significant positive predictors explaining 55% of the variance in intent to visit Cuba. In the five-year model, social norms and social return remained significant predictors, but ideal social self-concept replaced actual social self-concept as a significant predictor to explain 58% of the variance in intent to visit Cuba within the next 5 years. The 10-year model mimicked the results of the five-year model but with less variance explained (42% vs. 58%) (see Table 3).

While social norms were found to be the best indicator of intent to travel, each socially symbolic construct was highly correlated with intent to travel (Table 2). Practically speaking, it is difficult to represent specific social norms in tourism marketing campaigns. It may be easier for marketers to focus their efforts on either the anticipated social return traveling to a destination provides or the congruence in social self-concept, both of which can be directly referenced in marketing materials. For example, a public figure representative of a market segment's ideal social self-concept promoting a destination on social media could simultaneously appeal to a consumer's social self-concept and indicate a high rate of social return for the consumer. Results also suggest that while actual social self-concept is more significant over shorter time horizons, ideal social self-concept becomes more

Table 1
Confirmatory factor analysis of constructs.

Scale and item description	N	MEAN	R	ERROR	AVE	CR
Social Return from Tourism Scale (SRS)[a]					*86%*	*.91*
Social media posts of travel to Cuba make ...						
... the traveler look cool	751	4.01	.95	.30		
... the traveler more popular	751	3.88	.94	.40		
... the traveler stand out	750	4.22	.91	.54		
... the traveler look unique	751	4.22	.93	.48		
... the traveler look savvy	751	4.00	.96	.25		
... me envious of the traveler	751	3.79	.87	.95		
Actual Social Self-Concept					*98%*	*.96*
Travelers to Cuba ...						
... are consistent with how I believe others see me	749	3.79	.97	.21		
... reflect the type of person others think I am.	751	3.82	.98	.15		
... are similar to how others view me	750	3.82	.98	.17		
Ideal Social Self-Concept					*97%*	*.96*
Travelers to Cuba ...						
... are consistent with how I would like others to see me.	751	3.94	.98	.13		
... reflect the type of person I want others to think I am	753	3.91	.98	.12		
... are similar to how I want others to view me	749	3.92	.98	.13		
Social Norms[a]					*78%*	*.76*
Most people who are important to me would ...						
... approve of me traveling to Cuba	758	4.27	.85	.91		
... expect me to travel to Cuba	758	3.60	.91	.66		
... visit Cuba themselves	758	3.66	.90	.66		
I plan to travel to Cuba within the next year[b]	758	2.62				
I plan to travel to Cuba within the next 5 years[b]	632	2.92				
I plan to travel to Cuba within the next 10 years[b]	502	2.53				

Model One Fir: $\chi 2(df) = 602(84)$; CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.09.
[a] Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree - 7 = Strongly agree.
[b] Scale 1 = Not at all likely - 7 = Very likely.

Table 2
Correlations and squared correlations between model constructs.

	SRS	ASSC	ISSC	SN	YR 1	Y5	Y10
Social Return (SRS)	86%	0.46	0.49	0.39	0.29	0.26	.20
Actual Social Self-Concept (ASSC)	0.68	98%	0.90	0.67	0.43	0.48	0.34
Ideal Social Self-Concept (ISSC)	0.70	0.95	97%	0.63	0.39	0.48	0.35
Social Norms (SN)	0.62	0.82	0.79	78%	0.48	0.46	0.30
Intent to travel (Year 1)	0.54	0.65	0.62	0.69	1	-	-
Intent to Travel (Next 5 Years)	0.51	0.69	0.69	0.68	-	1	-
Intent to Travel (Next 10 years)	0.45	0.58	0.59	0.55	-	-	1

Note: Based on Year 1 model; All correlations are significant at $p < .05$. Diagonal line represents average variance explained (AVE) by each construct; Numbers below the diagonal line are correlations and numbers above the line are squared correlations.

Table 3
Structural equation models predicting intention to travel to Cuba.

SEM Models	Hypothesized Relationship	R	*p*	Support for Relationship
Year 1: R^2 = .55	Social Norms→ Intention to travel to Cuba within the next year	.58	.001	Y
	Social Return → Intention to travel to Cuba within the next year	.12	.001	Y
	Actual Social Self-Concept → Intention to travel to Cuba within the next year	.20	.047	Y
	Ideal Social Self-Concept → Intention to travel the next year	-.11	.250	N
Next Five Years: R^2 = .58	Social Norms→ Intention to travel to Cuba within the next 5 years	.43	.001	Y
	Social Return → Intention to travel to Cuba within the next 5 years	.08	.024	Y
	Actual Social Self-Concept → Intention to travel to Cuba within the next 5 years year	.13	.152	N
	Ideal Social Self-Concept → Intention to travel within the next 5 years	.20	.026	Y
Next Ten Years: R^2 = .42	Social Norms→ Intention to travel to Cuba within the next 10 years	.42	.001	Y
	Social Return → Intention to travel to Cuba within the next 10 years	.12	.008	Y
	Actual Social Self-Concept → Intention to travel to Cuba within the next 10 years	.05	.602	N
	Ideal Social Self-Concept → Intention to travel the next 10 years	.23	.02	Y

Year 1: $\chi 2(df) = 671.6(95)$; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.09.
Next 5 Years: $\chi 2(df) = 552.8(95)$; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.09.
Next 10 Years: $\chi 2(df) = 515.8(95)$; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.09.

significant over longer periods of time. Hence, actual social self-concept should be used to attract tourists in the immediate future, possibly because people feel they are less able to transition their actual social self-concept into their ideal-social self-concept in a short period of time.

Interestingly, the variance explained in intent to travel by symbolic motivators fluctuated between models. While the year 1 and year 5 model explained 55% and 58% of the variance in intent to travel respectively, the year 10 model only explained 42% indicating that the influence of symbolic constructs may wane over time. As prior findings have indicated, functional attributes are also important to the destination selection process (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003), and may hold more influence in the formation of the initial consideration set, but as tourists scan the horizon for the next upcoming trip, they place more emphasis on the short-term social image associated with visiting the destination rather than the functional attributes that may have potentially first prompted their consideration to visit the destination. While this work did not consider symbolic and functional attributes in tandem, future research should consider the two motivational factors across multiple time horizons. Additionally, this study only measured intent to visit rather than actual travel. A longitudinal study should be conducted to determine if symbolic attributes significantly affect actual travel in the same way they do intent. Lastly, little is known about how these socially symbolic constructs influence intent to travel across demographic variables such as age, gender, income, and education. Future research that is able to extend this initial work in these suggested ways will help practitioners better capitalize on the growing importance symbolic consumption has on destination choice, and thus, translate these travel intentions into actual visitation.

Author contributions

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Casey Moran is the first author of the study as this research note is based upon her Senior Thesis at the University of Georgia. She contributed to all aspects of the paper.

Bynum Boley is the corresponding author for the study and co-advised Ms. Moran through her Senior Thesis with Dr. Woosnam. He wrote parts of the paper, conducted the analysis and oversaw the manuscript submission process.

Kyle Woosnam contributed to the paper through writing parts of the introduction and discussion section. Dr. Woosnam was also very involved in mentoring Ms. Moran through her Senior Thesis.

Evan Jordan contributed to the paper through the idea to conduct the analysis across three time horizons. He helped write the methods section and provided feedback on how to best model these proposed relationships.

Carol Kline was the manuscript's resident expert on Cuba and ensured that the paper was written in a way that acknowledged the current political climate between the USA and Cuba. It was also Dr. Kline initial idea to conduct a survey of American travelers and their perceptions of traveling to Cuba. As with all of the authors, Dr. Kline participated in the main data collection and provided insight to the development of the manuscript.

Whitney Knollenberg contributed to the paper by participating in the main data collection and providing insight to how to model the proposed relationships.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.03.023.

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