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# Research Proposal for Analyzing Users of Consumer Generated Media Based on Age

Jamie Levitt

Johnson & Wales University - Providence, JLevitt@jwu.edu

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Research Proposal for Analyzing Users of Consumer Generated Media Based on Age

Jamie Levitt

Johnson & Wales University

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Professor Sivula

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### **Abstract**

Consumer Generated Media (CGM), a form of internet service in which customers provide feedback on the goods and services they have utilized, is the fastest growing sector on the internet. In fact, in 2005, more than 1.4 billion “consumer comments” were created for CGM. For the travel and hospitality industry, Tripadvisor™ is the largest source of information and data. It receives 47 million visits monthly.

Although CGM is increasingly relied upon by consumers, limited research has been conducted to demonstrate its value for businesses. Beyond an analysis regarding differences in CGM adoption on a country by country basis, there is a gap in demographic data. This proposal develops a method for determining the ages of CGM users. This research is proposed considering the negative relationship between age and general internet usage.

To determine the age breakdown of Tripadvisor users, questionnaires will be conducted at the ten most-visited cities in the United States. In each city, three hotels will be chosen at random where respondents will be asked to provide their age, and answer on a one-to-five scale, the level of reliance that they placed in TripAdvisor before reserving their respective hotel.

After processing the raw data, the analysis of Tripadvisor users is intended to provide tourism and hospitality business with a greater insight into information sharing. With an understanding of the user-age-breakdown from Tripadvisor, companies can juxtapose their consumer base and better utilize their marketing and advertising budgets.

### **Statement of Problem**

Consumer-generated media (CGM) is the fastest-growing form of media online (Gretzel, Kang & Lee, 2008). In this research, focused on the tourism and hospitality industries, CGM can include (but is not limited to) travel web logs (blogs), reviews, written review, travel photographs, travel videos and location ‘check-ins’. According to Gretzel, Kang and Lee, 1.4 billion “consumer comments” were produced via CGM outlets in 2005 (Gretzel, Kang, & Lee, 2008). Overall, the materials published within CGM resources can provide a wealth of knowledge for both consumers and businesses. This research, with the aim of providing clearer demographic data to businesses and marketers, aims to provide greater insight into the demographics, specifically the age, of CGM users.

In *Psychological barriers to Internet usage among older adults in the UK*, Adams, Stubbs, and Woods sourced UK National Statistics to provide a breakdown of internet usage by age. The statistics revealed that in the “16 – 24 year age group, 95% of men and 84% of women use the Internet. Usage then decreases steadily with age, with only 41% of men and 34% of women in the 55 – 64 year age group. In the 65-year plus group, usage falls to 14% of men and only 8% of women (Gretzel, Kang, & Lee, 2008).” Overall, there is clearly a negative correlation between gains in age and internet usage. As age rises, internet usage declines. Banyai and Havitz also demonstrate a negative correlation between age and CGM publication. Their study, analyzing the helpfulness of reviews, “revealed that 39% of the reviewers were from 35–49; 29% from 25–34; 26% from 50–64; 4% from 18–24; and 2% were over 64 years old (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).” These two negative correlations suggest a trend for relating CGM usage/ reliance to age.

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In analyzing research published on CGM, it appears that limited (if any) research has been conducted to compare relative age to CGM usage. Ultimately, this is not surprising. Several articles researching CGM have bemoaned a lack of thorough research. Notably, Lee, Law, and Murphy, 2011 (in reiterating Wenger) note that overall, “there has been very little research into how blogs can be used as part of a marketing communication mix, and much more needs to be done on this topic (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).” Banyai and Havitz (2012) also suggest that limited desire exists amongst researchers to pursue further research for CGM: “The content of these online narratives and social networks has recently become a topic of interest to few researchers looking to provide valuable tools for destination marketers (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).”

Beyond this acknowledgement, that greater research needs to be conducted regarding CGM, a broad acceptance exists, though, that CGM has become a mainstream tool that can aid or damage the reputation of respective destinations and establishments.

Overall, it is frequently used by the public to influence travel decisions and travel purchases. Lee, Law and Murphy suggest that today’s traveler uses “various types and amounts of information—online and offline (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).” Banyai and Havitz (2012) are even bolder, suggesting that that “Blogs (a form of CGM) have been regarded as one of the most important information sources for travel planning mostly due to the perceived independence of the source of the message (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).” The sentiment that CGM is an “important information source” is reiterated by Jeong and Jeon who suggest that use of CGM is growing rapidly: “Today, customers obtain travel-related information from the Internet more often than ever before and they also collect others’ first-hand experiential reviews of particular hospitality offerings before making their final purchase decisions (Jeong & Jeon, 2008).”

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Grezel, Kang and Lee go so far as to describe CGM as the fast growing form of media on the internet (Grezel, Kang & Lee, 2008). Ultimately, O'Connor, acknowledging that CGM has become a major resource suggests that travel industry needs to adjust to its presence: "Such changes have important implications, particularly for the travel sector, which has for many years used the Web as both a marketing medium and a selling mechanism and must now adapt to its evolving characteristics (O'Connor, 2010)."

Considering a) that correlation research has been conducted for CGM publication, b) that there is a lack of overall CGM research and analysis and, c) that the travel industry "must now adapt" to CGM, this analysis will, via quantitative data, determine the age range of CGM users. This research will also reconfirm the aforementioned negative correlation between rising age and CGM usage. It is hypothesized that the negative regression between age and CGM reliance will be greater than that of age versus internet usage. This is hypothesized as CGM usage is more focused than broad internet usage (which could include emailing, chatting, or media usage).

### **Literature Review**

In *Customer Reviews of Hotel Experiences through Consumer Generated Media* Jeong and Jeon note that "By participating in different forms of [electronic word of mouth (eWOM)], individual consumers become powerful opinion leaders who exert influences on one another in finding right products and services (Jeong & Jeon, 2008)." Jeong and Jeon go on to explain that this empowerment of consumers has a great impact on the travel industry: "Given the marketing power of consumers' online communications, the hospitality industry needs to take immediate action to become part of virtual interaction communities and listen to how the industry performs from the eyes of consumers (Jeong & Jeon, 2008)."

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This need for “immediate action” resonates in the literature reviewed. Each source is attempting to “decrypt” CGM in their own respective manner. The literature reviewed can be categorized into three sections, each attempting to better understand the value of CGM. These three categories are: research determining CGM validity, research which is business-focused and research which is consumer-focused.

### **Business-Focused Analysis**

In *Differences In Consumer-Generated Media Adoption and Use: A Cross-National Perspective*, authors Gretzel, Kang and Lee seek to determine their different uses, across nations, in the travel sector. The distinct problem witnessed by the authors relates to the understanding and interpretation of CGM. Also, from a business standpoint, the authors witness lost opportunity regarding CGM. They surmise that, “travel marketers need to better understand what drives CGM use in different markets.” Therefore, for this research, the authors focus on identifying and exploring “the specific conditions in these markets which could provide explanations for differences in CGM adoption and use (Gretzel, Kang & Lee, 2008).”

In setting this case-study, the authors establish “nations” as the “primary units of analysis for the study. The United States, The United Kingdom, Germany and China were chosen for this research as that they “represent three different continents “supporting a “global perspective (Gretzel, Kang & Lee, 2008).” These countries also represented the highest levels of travel and internet usage. To obtain qualitative data in The United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and China, the authors reference secondary data from “various news sources, government and association websites [and]... research reports (Gretzel, Kang & Lee, 2008).” After reviewing the data, and referencing foundational research, the authors categorize results in the following

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areas: CGM Adoption and Use in the Four Visitor Markets, Influence of National Culture, Technology Infrastructure, Media Landscape, and Online Travel. These areas of research, when considered together, lead to the authors' conclusions regarding national CGM usage.

The authors' conclusions focus on the national differences in adoption speed and usage patterns for consumer driven media. Based on published studies, they clearly determine that there are broad differences in CGM adoption. Data displayed demonstrates that one-third of Americans utilize CGM for commerce. Furthermore, the authors demonstrate that a greater number of Chinese internet-users utilize CGM, but in a different manner: to "express their opinions and emotions and influence public opinion (Gretzel, Kang & Lee, 2008)." Lastly, Germany has the lowest usage and "limited interest in creating content online (Gretzel, Kang & Lee, 2008)."

Lee, Law, and Murphy in *Analyzing Travel Blogs Using a Realist Evaluation Approach*, suggest a new method of analyzing CGM reviews. As their title suggests, they surmise that a "realist" evaluation, which is both qualitative and quantitative, is an ideal balance for data presentation and analysis. Their hypothesis is tested against published research regarding data gathering. Most notably, they reference Mark, Henry and Julnes' realist evaluation theory (Lee, Law, and Murphy, 2011) to support their hypothesis.

Banyai and Havitz (2012) criticize the abundance of research, which categorizes CGM in a quantitative manner. For example, reviews may be labeled and recorded as "positive" or "negative", yet their written content is ignored. Thus, Banyai and Havitz remind us that "blogs are personal experiences (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011)." Beyond this, Banyai and Havitz argue that by specifically referencing CGM materials, "The gap between what products the destination has to offer and what the visiting tourists expect and demand can be bridged if [the Tourism/

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Hospitality industry] use blogs to uncover the meanings tourists assign to their experiences (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).” Yet, Banyai and Havitz (2012) understand that there are drawbacks to analyzing CGM in a purely qualitative manner. In referencing a study by Carson, they note, “Locating relevant information on the Internet can sometimes be compared to finding a needle in a haystack. Sourcing and extracting relevant blog content is the first challenge for tourism organizations looking to monitor tourists’ attitudes, opinions and perceptions of tourism products. While researching travel blogs related to Australia’s Northern Territory, Carson (2008) found that there was a lot of “noise” in the results (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).” Today, there is such an abundance of CGM that it can be difficult to obtain meaningful material. Therefore Lee, Law, and Murphy admit that “The “noise” associated with searching for relevant content could lead [establishments/ companies] into a very time consuming task (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).”

In concluding, Banyai and Havitz (2012) suggest that CGM data should be objectively categorized: “Examining bloggers’ cultural background, and the impact it has on their travel experiences and meaning creation, can help destination marketers to gain a deeper understanding of their visitors in regards to what their values, beliefs, demands, and expectations are (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).” Yet, they also suggest that to obtain pure feedback, that the text written in CGM must be read and processed by an establishment: “...researchers and marketers can gain access to meaningful information related to tourists’ experiences anytime, anywhere, and at a minimal cost (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).”

*Managing a Hotel’s Image on TripAdvisor* by O’Connor provides a different angle on analyzing CGM content for the benefit of travel/ hospitality businesses. In doing so, O’Connor chose one-hundred London hotels at random and analyzed these hotels, through TripAdvisor, for

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common causes of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The impetus for this research surrounds the increased clout given to CGM: “In particular user-generated content – content created by consumers themselves for use by their peers has gained much credibility in the eyes of the...Such changes have important implications, particularly for the travel sector (O’Connor, 2010).”

O’Connor’s methodology requires that phrases recorded in CGM reviews (from TripAdvisor) be juxtaposed against review grades (1, the lowest through 5, the highest). In doing so, O’Connor was able to determine whether certain words or phrases were more likely to be present in a good, or bad review. Notably, “examining the data shows the importance of hotel location. In addition to being the most frequently mentioned issue, more satisfied customers mention it very frequently, implying that it is something that has contributed positively to their experience. Room size, on the other hand, was mentioned frequently by both satisfied and dissatisfied customer (O’Connor, 2010).”

O’Connor’s research also included an ancillary study, which determined that only 0.5% of hotels in this study were responding in TripAdvisor reviews. O’Connor suggests that beyond seeing a need for better and greater review analysis/ interpretation that hotels must actively protect their image: “it can be managed and must not be ignored. On today’s web, the model is changing from where a brand image was set by the supplier to one where it is forged by a continuous active dialogue with consumers... To cope with this, hotels need to be more proactive, continuously engaging in dialogue with the customer, to protect their brand image (O’Connor, 2010).”

### **Consumer-Focused Analysis**

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Banyai and Havitz's (2012) *Analyzing Travel Blogs Using a Realist Evaluation Approach* references the "noise" which exists due to an the abundance of CGM materials available on the internet. Lee, Law and Murphy (2011) in *Helpful Reviewers in TripAdvisor, an Online Travel Community* builds on this premise to determine the characteristics for an ideal reviewer, and, in turn, ideal reviews for consumers to rely upon.

In establishing their premise, Lee, Law and Murphy utilize previous studies to determine the "attributes of reputable information." Ultimately, they determine "Research suggests that expertise and trustworthiness influence source credibility, which consequently leads to more positive evaluation of reviews (Lee, Law & Murphy, 2011)." Therefore, ideal reviewers are first and foremost, well-travelled.

After deriving "attributes of reputable information", Lee, Law and Murphy, acquired a random sample of 928 reviews by 928 unique reviewers from TripAdvisor. The reviewers were of a broad background: "After excluding 353 (38%) of the 928 reviewers declining to reveal their age, 39% of the reviewers were from 35–49; 29% from 25–34; 26% from 50–64; 4% from 18–24; and 2% were over 64 years old. After excluding 452 reviewers who declined to give their gender, men (49%) and women (51%) were almost equally distributed. Reviewers who joined in 2009 comprised almost half (47%) the reviewers (Lee, Law & Murphy, 2011)." These reviews were analyzed to compare 1) helpfulness (via TripAdvisor's Review Helpful rating) versus travel expertise, 2) reviewer age versus helpfulness and 3) gender versus helpfulness. There was a positive relationship between helpfulness and expertise: "Expertise correlated positively with review helpfulness ( $N = 547$ ,  $\rho = .136$ ,  $p = .002$ ), implying that reviewers who travel to many [different] destinations tend to generate helpful reviews (Lee, Law & Murphy, 2011)." On the

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other hand, there was not a substantive relation between gender and helpfulness as well as age and helpfulness.

Beyond expertise, age and gender, Lee, Law and Murphy (2011) compared total reviews, age disclosure, gender disclosure, lag time and valence against review helpfulness. These comparisons for correlation led to a set of attributes for helpful reviewers. Helpful reviewers should:

1. Travel to many destinations;
2. Be indistinguishable from other reviewers in age and gender;
3. Actively post reviews;
4. Disclose their age and gender information less than other reviewers;
5. Give destination hotels a lower review rating than other reviewers.

(O'Connor, 2010)

### **CGM Validity**

The aforementioned *Customer Reviews of Hotel Experiences through Consumer Generated Media* by Jeong and Jeon (2008) aims to determine the “validity” of reviews conducted on the CGM travel website TripAdvisor. In doing so Jeong and Jeon compared reviews from TripAdvisor against the Mobil Travel Guide’s Five Star Rating System. Their intention was to identify any possible differences in expectation between Mobil’s fixed rating system (hotels must meet certain benchmarks to be classified at each higher level) and the expectations of consumer driven reviews, specifically TripAdvisor’s ‘Popularity Index’, which identifies the most “popular” locations for lodging in a given area.

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Jeong and Jeon focused their study on hotels reviewed in New York City. Furthermore, they only analyzed hotels which have obtained one-hundred, or more reviews. This allowed them to “increase generalizability of the study’s findings (Jeong & Jeon, 2008).” These hotels were then categorized based on ownership (independent versus chain) and class-level. Ultimately, when analyzing their findings, they determine that “the popularity index coincides with the hotel star rating system.”

Jeong and Jeon’s results demonstrate a clear pattern, which helps validate reviews on TripAdvisor. When observed as a whole, they follow similar patterns established by traditional ratings services. With the TripAdvisor reviews validated, Jeong and Jeon move forward to provide further recommendations to the travel and hospitality industry. For instance, their comparison of independent and chain reviews on TripAdvisor led to some clear generalizations and suggestions: “...independent hotels in NYC should pay more attention to improve room amenities and check-in and check-out procedures and maintain high quality services in order to compete with chain hotels, as these areas appeared to be one of the underperforming attributes for independent hotels (Jeong & Jeon, 2008).”

Two further publications address concerns regarding authenticity. O’Connor attempts to determine if users who only post one review, rather than maintain a dossier, are fake, as they do not have a history of review credibility. He notes, “In this study, many of the most extreme scores were from reviewers with only a single review...To investigate if such findings were statistically significant, reviews from users that had posted only a single review were selected, and their mean rating compared with that of the rest of the sample...the mean score for single reviews was significantly lower than for the sample as a whole...However this in itself does not prove that single reviews are false, merely that such reviews tend to be more extreme, which is

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understandable, as it reflects a well-known phenomenon, particularly with guest comment cards, whereby extremely negative or extremely positive customers are more likely to provide feedback (O'Connor, 2010).”

Banyai and Havitz suggest that there are threats that tourism marketers could “use their own employees to pose online as consumers (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).” They suggest that this uncertainty can dissuade consumers from frequenting an establishment or using a CGM source. Thus, they suggest that “moving forward, addressing the issue related to the time and energy needed to locate and analyze travel blogs.”

### **Methodology**

Of the literature reviewed, multiple pieces lauded the breadth of CGM resource TripAdvisor. Lee, Law and Murphy (2011) note that “TripAdvisor is the most popular travel community with over 47 million monthly visits, 20 million members, and over 35 million travel reviews in August, 2010 (Lee, Law & Murphy, 2011).” O'Connor furthers these figures by noting that: “about 8% of all leisure travelers who used the web for travel research visit TripAdvisor. In 2007, the site was named one of the Top 25 Travel Milestones by USA Today, being cited as having been instrumental in changing the way in which consumers research and plan travel (O'Connor, 2010).”

Jeong and Jeon also laud TripAdvisor's enhanced credibility: “TripAdvisor has been implementing various techniques to improve its integrity and credibility, such as the use of sophisticated detecting algorithms, spot checks, and readers' abuse investigation. The company's

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continuous efforts for further r enhancement like this make the review site a valuable and reliable source. A survey by TimesOnline indicated that 82% of public users trust reviews posted on a travel review site like TripAdvisor.Com (Jeong & Jeon, 2008).”

Given the reoccurring presence of TripAdvisor within published literature, this research will focus on the reliance of TripAdvisor to guide travel and hospitality decisions.

Considering the vetted, peer-reviewed research conducted by Hecht and Martin relating to demographic preferences at hostels in Canada, this research will follow similar methodology: survey completion.

Surveys will be conducted at a random selection of hotels, which have obtained a positive review on TripAdvisor (a rating of either four or five out of five). This will ensure that utilizing TripAdvisor reviews *could* be motivation for a customer to visit a hotel. If the rating is lower, it is unlikely that any patrons would have utilized TripAdvisor as a motivator to visit, as it would have dissuaded those who rely on TripAdvisor from using that respective hotel.

The locations for survey conduction will be based on the ten most visited cities in the United States:

1. Orlando
2. New York
3. Chicago
4. Anaheim
5. Miami
6. Las Vegas
7. Atlanta
8. Houston

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9. Philadelphia

10. San Diego

(List: America's Most-Visited)

Utilizing this list of cities ensures a broad base of visitors, with different travel backgrounds, but also includes locations in each region of the United States (Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, South, Midwest, and West).

In each city, three hotels will be selected (the same figure utilized by Hecht and Martin to offer an overview of hostels in Toronto) for each star level to provide an overview of age breakdown versus CGM/ TripAdvisor reliance in that respective locale. These questions, presented in the form of a written questionnaire will be provided to guests upon hotel check-in.

Respondents will be asked to provide their age, and answer on a one-to-five scale, the level of reliance that they placed in TripAdvisor before reserving their respective hotel. The categories on the one-to-five scale are as follows:

1. Did not rely
2. Relied very little
3. Relied some
4. Relied very much
5. Relied solely

Respondents will also be asked to provide their gender, and their purpose of travel (business versus leisure). This will allow analysis to determine if female travel planners have different processes than men. A check of travel purpose will allow for business travellers, who may not make their own reservations, to be vetted. Overall, the aim is to obtain one-hundred responses from each selected hotel. This figure is similar to the value obtained by Hecht and

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Martin for each hotel visited. Also, in using a relatively frank questionnaire, it is surmised that more respondents will be willing to participate and respond to the questions presented.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this research proposal seeks to determine the range of ages, which rely upon travel-focused CGM to prepare travel reservations. In reviewing the literature present regarding CGM, it is clear that there is an ongoing attempt to decrypt the value (for consumers and businesses) and validity of CGM. In connecting age with CGM reliance, it is hypothesized that there is a negative correlation. As age rises, CGM reliance (studied via TripAdvisor) will fall.

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