The Creation of an Online Travel Social Networking: The Case Study of I Roam Alone

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Abstract

The Internet is the sixth basic needs of human beings. It plays an important roles of information exchange and relationship building and unsurprisingly, social networking can be. Little was known about this issue. The content from "I Roam Alone" was analysed. It was found that the social network was created and expanded by the blogger generating the content including travel experiences, inspiration, natural conservation, and love on the fanpage. Then, the people who were interested in the content gave likes and conversations, tags other friends to read and chat. The relationships appeared to happen between the blogger and readers, readers and their friends, and readers and those whom they were not familiar with. Furthermore, sharing the content on their timelines was another option. This allowed the expansion of social networks from one node to the others. That can later on affect changes from offline to online marketing. This can contribute to building effective and sustainable travel social networking. To draw the audience's attention, the blogger shared her travel experiences most. It was followed by making readers inspired, encouraging them to conserve the nature, and sharing love stories.

Keywords: Social Networking, Content Marketing, Tourism

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the Internet is a part of our daily life. It plays the important roles of information exchange and relationship building and then it is unsurprising that travel social networking can be created there. Changes on marketing from offline to online marketing can be made, therefore.

Social media are such a vital platform for various industries including tourism business. According to the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2015), citing the information of the Tourism Digital Economy underlined that almost half of tourism industries pay their attention to exploit social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google for the purpose of competitiveness. Travelers employ these tools for planning their trips, booking their accommodation, and sharing their thoughts and experiences. (MGR Online, 2011) referring to the consensus of the Tourism Authority of Thailand and KTC on the effectiveness of social media on travel information seeking and increasing spendings. The other statistical report confirmed the current customer journey and behavior about the use of online media in information seeking and decision-making, for example, booking hotels that, the majority of the generation Y people fancied seeking travel information via the internet and, particularly, via mobile devices (20 Mind-Blowing Tourism and Travel Stats You need to Know, 2013).

On the Internet, influencer marketing including guru, blogger, and those who post their comments on webboard is the most powerful channel on the generation Y people's decision-making, following to the studies of Lampoon et al. (2012) and Satyadharma (2013). Lampoon et al. (2012) also reasoned that because the people in today's world are active and smarter, they prefer finding out information on their own to seeking out information from travel agency. Blogger is, thus, more influential.

A blogger is somewhat a person who writes and shares his/her own personal dairy online. There are four types of bloggers, i.e. independent bloggers- their

purposes are to tell their own stories and share their experiences online only; commercial bloggers– their purposes are to sell products and/or services and be a marketing channel; corporate bloggers– their purpose is to circulate internal communication; and professional bloggers– their purpose is to write something commercially and get remuneration in return.

Facebook page is a popular tool for any kind of bloggers because of its reachability, accessibility, and social networking (Electronic Transactions Development Agency (Public Organization), 2015). However, little is known about the bond between tourism and social networking. And, current studies separately pay attention either to tourism, for instance, factors and accommodation preference or to social networking, for example, social networking and children (Anusasananun, 2008).

The contributions of social networking via social media are not only to build friendship and collaboration, but also to create social construction and movements, for example, starting from virtual relationship in an online community to real-life relationship (Nilphan, 2006) and changes in the government's educational policies, resulting from creating a youth's social network, so-called www.dek-d.com (Anusasananun, 2008).

In any case, high success and popularity in public engagement importantly result from so-called content marketing. Because Thai people would like to escape from boredom and stress and posses overloaded information, previous studies suggest sense of humor, informal, short-form, rather than long-form, and pictorial content (e.g., Dussaneepanit, 2012; Kongcharoen, 2015; Suksabai, 2013)

Together with these, referring to the quote of Keith Jenkins, CEO, Travel Blogger Network ambassador and a creator of the Velvet Escape travel blog, it is said "Travel bloggers are changing the media landscape.

They offer immediate and longer term benefits". In other words, he means "that bloggers can create buzz before, during, and after the trip, tying together their content with the same hashtag. In addition, because online content is searchable, has a long shelf life, and incorporates social media interaction, travel blogs can rank high on Google" (Detour [Travel], 2015, p. 46). Indifferently, Mariëtte du Toit-Helmbold, CEO, Destinate also agreed that "It's not like publishing a magazine article and hoping people read it … On the web, you have content and stories from a variety of perspectives talking to a variety of audiences over an extended period. As a destination, we can use that content through our channels" (Detour [Travel], 2015, p. 46). Travel blogs are also found cheap and economic (Pan et al., 2007).

The purposes of this study were, therefore, to examine the creation and expansion of travel social network of the most popular online travel blogger, i.e. I Roam Alone and to study its effectiveness of the content used from the audience's voices, i.e. like, share, and comment. It is important to note at this point that, according to the ranking provided by the http://www.kelliekraft.com/ (Kelliekraft, 2013), I Roam Alone is, overall, ranked the second, but it is the most popular Thai independent travel blogger. From the analysis of the researchers, it is also famous among the audience, i.e. there is the highest post.

Methods and Materials

The content in February 2016 from I Roam Alone was analysed. This was because, considering from post engagement, its blogger was most successful. During that time, there were 19 posts in total. It was worth noting that the blogger gave her consent on using and scrutinizing the content. The details of the 19 posts were as follows:

Table 1 The February 2016 content post of I Roam Alone.

No.	Post Date	
1	2 Feb 2016	From mountain to sea. Heart and body is going together.
2	3 Feb 2016	The traveler "when is your happiest time?"
3	5 Feb 2016	Serengeti of Argentina.
4	6 Feb 2016	Anaconda Episode I.
5	7 Feb 2016	Anacondaaa! There is no of Nicki Minaj. But, there is only Mint is badly screaming. Guess how heavy it is. Guess how bad its smell. Let's see.
6	9 Feb 2016	Behind the traveler's scene "Travel is not perfect fried rice. But it is a a spicy and sour Thai-styled soup. Even though you've got a sore throat, it is delicious. The more you eat, the more it is delicious and you never stop eating it"
7	11 Feb 2016	Sometimes you gotta get through your fear to see the beauty on the other side.
8	13 Feb 2016	Travel, love, and a white shirt. "Have you ever found that when you want to buy something because of necessity, you could not find it".
9	15 Feb 2016	360 ice cream shop at Merida, Venezuela.
10	16 Feb 2016	27 hours from Venezuela to Colombia.
11	17 Feb 2016	Eat clean food ... until you finish all the food: Bandeja, an authentic cuisine recommended when visiting Medellin, Colombia.
12	18 Feb 2016	Pablo Escobar, the never unforgettable people in the history.
13	19 Feb 2016	Large-sized turtle eggs pastry. The most famous dessert at the churches in Medellin, Colombia.
14	21 Feb 2016	Hostel 101: how can we live comfortably?
15	23 Feb 2016	Miscellany The Rock ... Stone G and U of La Piedra.
16	24 Feb 2016	Sloth: Not lazy, not slow and not unconscious.
17	26 Feb 2016	The brave traveler. "If you were not rich, how can you travel?"
18	28 Feb 2016	Arrive Phu Kradung. To prove true love "For true love, let's go to Phu Kradung together".
19	29 Feb 2016	A journey of coffee queen.

From the analysis, there were four themes found, i.e. Travel experiences, inspiration, Love and natural conservation. (More details were explained in the results section).

Results

Following to the purposes of the study, the findings were elaborated in two parts, i.e. the creation and expansion of the online travel social network of the I Roam Alone blog and its effectiveness of the content used from the audience's voices including like, share, and comment.
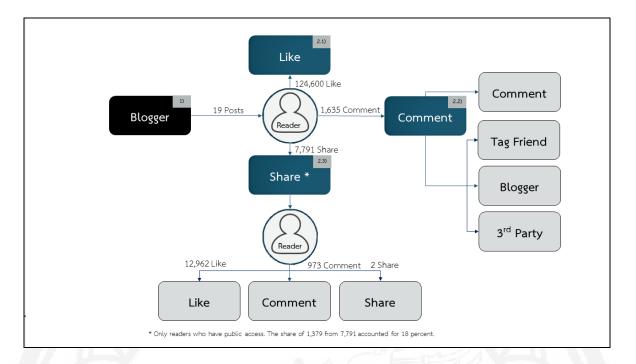
Creation and expansion of the I Roam Alone online travel social network

Figure 1 showed its network nodes.

Figure 1 Building and expanding I Roam Alone online travel social network.

It was found that the social network was created and expanded by the blogger generating the content including travel experiences, inspiration, natural conservation, and love on the fanpage. Then, the people who were interested in the content gave likes and conversations, tags other friends to read and chat. The relationships appeared to happen between the blogger and readers, readers and their friends, and readers and those whom they were not familiar with. Furthermore, sharing the content on their timelines was another option. This allowed the expansion of social networks from one node to the others.

It could be concluded from the diagram that, this social network is a hub of the gathering of the people who fell in love with travelling, the sharing and exchanging experiences and opinions, and the information seeking. The blogger, moreover, was as if a person who could inspire others and a starting point for circulating dialogues and building the later relationships between the blogger and readers, readers and their friends, and readers and those whom they were not familiar with. Creative and open-minded environment was, likewise, recognized and respected

I Roam Alone created and expanded its online social network with two strategies including content posted and audience response.
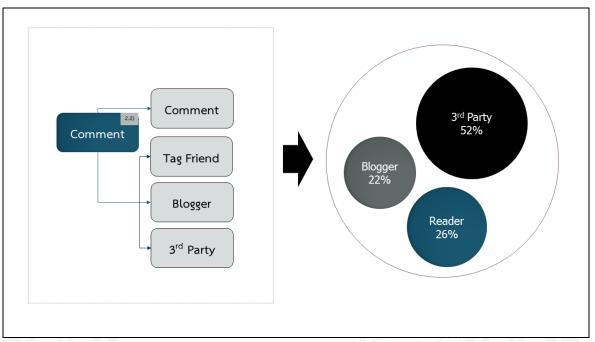
Figure 2 Ratio of readers, the blogger, and other parties in the I Roam Alone fanpage.

It could be elaborated that the blogger provided 19 posts in total and their content was about travel experiences, inspiration, natural conservation, and love, as stated above. In turn, the responses from the audience were as follows. There were 124,600 likes. Furthermore, 1,635 dialogues between the blogger and audience who are readers and those who join sharing and talking afterwards were shared. In details, the majority of the conversation came from those who join sharing and talking afterwards at 52 per cent. The smallest proportion was, nonetheless, disclosed in the blogger at 21 per cent. Last but not last, sharing the posts on one's own timeline counted for 7,791. Out of this number, 1,379 or 18 per cent were shared publicly. Out of 1,379, 12,962, 973, and 2 were liked, commented, and shared.

The use of the content on the blog and the audience's voices

Out of 19 posts, as mentioned above, the content the blogger exploited comprised travel experiences, inspiration, natural conservation, and love. The different voices were heard from the audience. Table 3 exhibited the details.

Table 2 Comparison between the blogger's posts and the audience Response

| Ranking from the Audience | Type of Content | Number of the Content | | Response from the Audience | | | | | Response from the Audience (per post) |
		No. of Post	%	Like	Share	Comment	Total	%	
1	Travel Experiences	12	63	62,100	975	801	63,873	48	5,323
2	Inspiration	4	21	36,100	2,779	542	39,421	29	9,855
3	Love	1	5	17,000	3,196	106	20,302	15	20,302
4	Natural Conservation	2	11	9,400	841	186	10,430	8	5,215
	Total	**19**	**100**	**124,600**	**7,791**	**1,635**	**134,026**	**100**	**40,695**

Both the blogger and the audience, especially in terms of like and comment mostly appreciated travel experiences. The audience, however, shared the love content on their timelines and with the bloggers, friends, and other people most. Apart from travel experiences, the blogger created the stories about inspiration, natural conservation, and love, respectively. Interestingly, the audience shared their travel experiences and opinions on natural conservation most while they gave their appraisal/criticism to the blogger's travel experiences. Likewise, they questioned on the blogger's inspiration.

The audience also fancied talking, sharing, and tagging about love.

Travel Experiences

For further information, the blogger- Mint Montol Kasantikul, the blogger of the I Roam Alone shared her personal travel experiences covering the introduction to famous people and places, (extraordinary) travel activities, special food and deserts, and travel methods and accommodation preferences. The following conversation showed the examples of a single dimension:

Colombia is famous in not only having beautiful girls, but also in having good coffee. It is believed that Colombian coffee is the world's best coffee. Post to Brazil and Vietnam, Colombia is ranked as the third country where can produce coffee most. In consideration of the quality, nonetheless, Colombia's is the best because its weather is appropriately good, cold through the year, and a great deal of rains as well as its soil comes from volcano. The country mostly plant Arabica coffee whose quality is higher than Robusta one, i.e. the former is more tasty and sweeter and not too much caffeine.

[Famous people and places]

One activity we usually do at Los Llanos is to see anacondas. Our guide goes with one wood stick and brave heart. Once he gets into the river, he is using the wood stick to find out anacondas and be aware of sleeping crocodiles. When meeting anacondas, he bends over and drags them to take photos. After 5 – 10 minutes, he gets them back to the river. This is a female anaconda. Its length is 5 metres. It is fat and very heavy.

[Personal travel experiences]

860 ice-cream flavors at Merida, Venezuela!
If you want to try some ice creams, you should find a Guinness Book-world-recorded shop. If you want to eat some ice creams, also, you should try Kaomokkai-flavoured and hotdog-flavoured ice creams.

[Special food and deserts]

Hostel 101: How can we stay at hostels comfortably? (Hostels are an economic place of stay and gather many people to sleep together. I have some tips to be given for those who have never been experienced or those who are unfamiliar with staying at hostels. Such tips purely come from my personal experiences.

I have been staying at more than hundred hostels. It is comfortable and convenient. Let's read it.

[Travel methods and accommodation preferences]

Inspiration

The inspiration content could be separated into two main issues, i.e. making the dream come true and overcoming fears. The following content demonstrated some examples of such two major inspiring issues.

Previously, like you guys, I thought that you could travel because you are rich. When I have started travelling and seeing other travelers, I recognize that it is unnecessary to be rich. Instead, such travelers are relatively poor. They travel by riding and hitchhiking, eat something economically, and stay economically. When there is no more money, they will find some jobs. When they have money, they continue travelling. Wealth does not involve. Because None has experienced all these matters, she answers the questions smiley

- *If you are poor, what do you use for your travelling?*
- *All you need is a little courage.*
- *Are you brave enough?*
- *Are you brave enough to leave all social factors framing your practices to do anything you want?*

[Making the dream come true]

"Sometimes you gotta get through your fears to see the beauty on the other side" (Good Dinosaur).

For me, the more I am afraid, the more I do. Whenever you overcome your fears, it means you are growing and your heart flies further. More opportunities will be given to your life.

[Overcoming fears]

Love

It was because such content was placed during Valentine's Day. Love issues, therefore, could not left behind. For example,

A white shirt is as if love. The more you push attempt to find love, the more it is gone or it is not good as expected. ...

Having family and boyfriend/girlfriend results from social influence. Unhappiness and uncomfortable appears to happen. It is time to be apart and leave both of us to find a proper partner.

Although the former boyfriend is not good, it makes me happy perfectly ... My Valentine's travelling.

Natural Conservation

Apart from sharing the blogger's travelling experiences, she gave some viewpoints and current issues, for example, about the Phu Kradueng National Park and its natural disasters. For instance,

If people do not have the opportunity to visit the Phu Kradueng National Park, loss of interesting stories can be the result. Nothing can be told from one generation to another.

No matter how beautiful it is, but if we do not help to conserve it, no remembrance and stories left can be shared to other generations.

It is so pity that although the Phu Kradueng National park is a symbol of love, friendship, and mental power, it becomes just as a view point... It is so pity.

Discussion

This study strengthens the statement saying friendship beyond frontier can be the greatest explanation, in other words. This finding failed into the same situation as the study of Change et al., 2015 that "Compared to younger adults, friend networks of older adults are smaller but contain a great proportion of individuals who are considered to be actual friends ... [Being exposed to Facebook helps them escape from] social isolation and loneliness". The finding also agrees with the study of Luo and Zhong (2015), likewise, that the social networking is "structured, loose-knit, flat, and of high centrality".

Three explanations could be projected. First, the credibility of the blogger triggered share, like, and comment behavior. The study of Hur et al. (2017) clearly pointed out that being exposed to content, emotional involvement, and physical and psychological bonding and rapport are created by the credibility of the source. Especially for the travel bloggers, being exposed to content was dependent on them (Huang et al., 2010).

Furthermore, it was about consumer behavior. This is evidenced by the statistical data of Ipsos, referred by Brand Buffet (2015) that, more than 50 per cent of consumers shared content because it is interesting, 43 per cent because it is important to themselves and entertaining, 37 per cent because they want others know what they believe, 30 per cent because they want someone to know about an issue, and 29 per cent because it is good rationales for their thought. As discovered by Chen et al. (2014), similarly, in order to trigger readers' fatigue and boredom out, it is important for travel bloggers to emphasize 'novelty, understandability, and interest' in the blogs.

Last but not least, the success of the case could be reasoned by storytelling: creating virtual and emotional experiences among readers and physically and psychologically get them closer to the destination presented. Magasic (2014) found three communication approaches for the sharing of travel experiences, i.e. 'by creating a routine in which traveler needs to regularly find an Internet connection', 'in taking the traveler out of the moment and putting them into a detached narratorial role', and 'by mediating the experience of travel as the blogger frequently takes their online audience into account as they travel'.

However, there were other factors encouraging exposure to content and engagement, for example, personality trait (Yoo and Gretzel, 2011), trip preference (Vas, 2017), attitude towards social media (e.g., Matikiti et al., 2017), perception of destination and vivid message (Wang, 2012), and so forth.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Social network was simply and sustainably created and expanded by the blogger generating the content including travel experiences, inspiration, natural conservation, and love on the fanpage. Then, the people who were interested in the content gave likes and conversations, tags other friends to read and chat. The relationships appeared to happen between the blogger and readers, readers and their friends, and readers and those whom they were not familiar with. Furthermore, sharing the content on their timelines was another option. This allowed the expansion of social networks from one node to the others. That can later on affect changes from offline to online marketing.

Social networking was also originated from the Exchange Theory, i.e. relationship and interaction were gradually developed through rewards and punishment and such relationship and interaction would happen if characteristics were shared between people.

Considering the effectiveness of the content used from the audience's voices, i.e. like, share, and comment on the content posted by the blogger, to attract the audience and draw their interest and attention as well as engagement, it was suggested to share the blogger's or the writer's travel experiences and inspiration, respectively. It could be criticized that because the researchers collected the data in the Valentine's day and that was why love issue was of highest interest (when considering the number of engagement per post). However, emotional involvement and relationship is a content strategy a writer should provide (Kee and Yazdanifard, 2015)

According to this study, some suggestions are given as follows. First, the bloggers should contribute contents that make followers feel close to home such as love or relationship. Furthermore, contents should be posted consistently so that participation can be created. Last but not least, it is suggested that the more bloggers create friendly dialogues, the better relationships in social networks can be enhanced.

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