6 The role of emoji use in destination decision making

Alaattin Basoda, Seden Dogan, and Cihan Cobanoglu

Introduction

Social media is defined as *"a media system that allows users to build two-way simultaneous communication with the emergence of Web 2.0"* (O'Reilly, 2005). The first social media platforms were blogs which were simple web pages that provide information on specific topics in reverse chronological order. The users read the writings and write comments to interact with the blog owners. Interacting through blogs has spread among Internet users quickly. Then, media platforms that allow users to generate their content have emerged. The content generated by users is being followed, reviewed, and shared by other users. This content includes letters, words, sentences, and visual elements (Firat, 2019). The visual elements that have been developed by Shigetaka Kurita in the late 1990s were named *emoji* and *emoticon* (Dogan & Collins, 2019). Emoticons express facial emotions, and emojis covers every area of life, such as animals, food, weather, etc. The emojis and emoticons are enabled for wordless communication or to strengthen the message.

Many companies have discovered social media's benefits and created accounts on different online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and many others. They use these platforms to promote their products and services by sharing posts, images, and videos — this new form of promoting is named 'social media marketing' . Companies also started to use emojis and emoticons on their promotional posts to attract their followers. Especially, fast food restaurants lead the usage of them. However, there is

not much information about how consumers perceive and react to emojis and emoticons. The literature has limited studies in the hospitality and tourism domain about this topic. Vidal *et al*. (2016) conducted a study on tweets about food that used emojis and emoticons. They analyzed 12,260 tweets and found that emojis were used more often than emoticons. Hsieh and Tseng (2015) stated that emoticons in text messages made messaging more fun and enjoyable, thus positively impacting interpersonal communication. Tossell *et al.* (2012) stated that at least one emoticon was found in 4% of text messages.

In most previous studies, emojis were interspersed independently outside (next right, bottom, in text, etc.) of the image's own space (e.g., Das *et al.,* 2019; Eru and Yakin, 2019; Huang *et al.*, 2020). On the contrary, this chapter draws attention to the fact that emojis are positioned directly on the image, not next to and around the image. Therefore, this study is the first to perform such an application. This chapter examines the role of emoji use on images in travelers' destination decision-making process. Travelers' positive affect (PA) and behavioral intentions (BINs) towards the destination [*to search for information about the destination (SI), to visit the destination (VD), to share the post on their social media accounts (SP), to subscribe to the destination's newsletter (SN), and to go on a virtual tour of the destination (GVT)*] and relationships with each other were considered as the steps of their decision-making process related to the destination. As a result, this chapter mainly explores how emoji presence on the promotional social media images differentiates the effects of travelers' reactions (PA) on each intention. Each of the five behavioral intentions was carried out separately, as each demonstrates a different intention towards the destination.

Literature review

Spitzberg (2006: 630) defined computer-mediated communication (CMC) as "*any human symbolic text-based interaction conducted or facilitated through digitally-based technologies*." Emoticons and emojis are the digital visual communicative elements, named as graphicons, used in CMC (Herring & Dainas, 2017). Emoticons were created in the form of symbols/icons ":-)" and then into pictograms "😊" to express and represent human emotions in CMC in 1982 (Skovholt *et al.*, 2014), later emoticons transformed into emojis. Emojis were designed for mobile phones in Japan in the late 1990s and portrayed as "e=picture, moji=character" (Novak *et al.*, 2015). Emoticons and emojis are facial and body icons that represent nearly nonverbal

personal emotions in text-based online communication in digital technology (Tang & Hew, 2019). Evans (2015: 1) defined an emoji as "*an iconic, visual representation of an idea, entity, feeling, status or event, that is used alongside or instead of words in digital messaging and social media.*" Thousands of emojis are used, such as facial expressions, concepts, objects (food, weather, activity, animal, plant, etc.) (Mathews & Lee, 2018).

Emoji is described as a form of visual language (Boothe & Wickstrom, 2017), emotional communication, visual expression symbol, visual paralanguage, visual rhetoric (Bai *et al.*, 2019), and non-linguistic expression (Das, 2020) used in CMC. Emoji is one of the most commonly used online visual elements in digital networks such as social media, instant text messages, and e-mail (Stark & Crawford, 2015). Therefore, emoji usage has become widespread in almost every phase of personal and professional human life by utilizing almost every online communication channel (Kaye *et al.*, 2021). Emojis have become an indispensable part of social media (Wijeratne *et al.*, 2017; Yu & Zhang, 2020). Individuals use emojis rather than text on social media (Abeysinghe *et al.*, 2018), because emojis are the easiest, brief, and fastest way to express one's emotions and thoughts on social media (Yakin & Eru, 2017). While emojis are helpful tools used to understand and improve the social-psychological characteristics of human communication (Gesselman *et al.*, 2019), social media has a direct connection with social psychology (Kende *et al.*, 2015). It can be said that the most effective area for emojis is social media.

On the other hand, Bai *et al.* (2019) stated that emojis have two main functions: emotional (expressing emotions) and semantic (making message meaning). It is an accepted fact that emoticons and emojis are online forms of expressing human emotions visually. Thereby, emotions are at their core (De Angeli *et al.*, 2020; Tang & Hew, 2019). Emojis are tools to analyze users' feelings and perspectives on any object, such as a product (Scherr *et al.*, 2019), and emoticons allow users to express, highlight, and clarify their sentiments in texts (Hogenboom *et al.*, 2013). Many analysts support these views and emphasize that messages or visuals containing emojis are more effective (Novak *et al.*, 2015) and grab the viewer's more emotional attention than those without emojis (Beattie, 2017; Daniel & Camp, 2020). These points illustrate that emojis have various special functions such as awakening emotions (Das *et al.*, 2019), increasing positiveness, empowering self-expression (Eru & Yakin, 2019), creating-reinforcing meanings, evoking-conveying positive feelings (Bai *et al.*, 2019), leaving positive impressions (Wibowo *et al.*, 2017), creating intimacy, providing psycho-

logical courtship (Gesselman *et al.*, 2019), lighting the mood, establishing emotional tone (Kaye *et al.*, 2016), displaying personality and differences (Marengo *et al.*, 2017), capturing emotional states (De Angeli *et al.*, 2020), activating a positive effect (Das *et al.*, 2019) and forming interpersonal bonds (Das, 2020) in the viewers in digital social interaction networks. These functions show that emojis differentiate, deepen, and reinforce the meaning of online images or texts, thus leaving a meaningful emotional impact on the viewers during digital communication (Bai *et al.*, 2019). Li *et al.* (2018) also suggest that sensory cues containing emojis used in online reviews about restaurants may make them more enjoyable for readers.

The decision-making process

Due to the nature of tourism, it is known that taxonomies on customer decision-making processes are manifold (Terttunen, 2017). As stated in research conducted by Smallman and Moore (2010), many models related to tourists' decision-making process have been developed. Travel stimuli, personal and social determinants, exogenous variables, motivation, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and decisions have been studied by Schmol, 1977. Awareness, desire, and destination image have been developed by Mathieson and Wall, 1982. Motivation, images, expectation, perception, and preference have been studied by Goodall, 1991. The needs, requests, goals, perceptions, and attitudes have been identified by Middleton and Clarke, 2001. One of the most used models for the tourists' decision-making process in tourism literature is the model of goal-directed behavior (MGB) developed by Perugini and Bagozzi (2001). As indicated at the MGB, the individual's actual behavior is determined by direct perceived behavioral control, frequency of past behavior, and behavioral intention, and indirectly by attitudes, anticipated emotions, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and desire (Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). It is stated that tourists' behavioral intentions are the best cues for understanding the decision-making processes for their actual future behaviors (Lam & Hsu, 2004; Terrah *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it is understood that the MGB is highly effective in determining tourists' decision-making about destination choice and information searches for traveling to these destinations (Song *et al.*, 2014).

   MGB also posits that emotions have an undeniable impact on the tourists' decision-making process, such as evaluating, forming, intention, and choosing (Leone *et al.*, 2005). Supporting this idea, it can be emphasized that emotion is one of the most important antecedents of tourists' behav-