

PERSONALITY OF TRAVEL OPINION LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

Travel opinion leaders play important roles in word-of-mouth marketing in tourism. They can influence potential tourists' decision making in buying tourism products. Therefore, tourism researchers and marketers have attempted to identify the characteristics of travel opinion leaders in order to develop efficient marketing activities. While some studies have indicated behavioral characteristics of travel opinion leaders, however, none study has attempted to profile travel opinion leaders by examining their psychological traits. The main purpose of the current research is to close this gap by using the Big Five model. Data was derived from 271 tourists in Taiwan. Results demonstrate that opinion leaders have the personality of extraversion, agreeableness and openness. The current results can enrich literature on travel opinion leaders and provide tourism firms with implications.

Keywords: *Travel opinion leader, Personality, Big Five model.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The core products of most tourism firms are services [1] [2] [3]. Due to uncertainties associated with services, potential tourists face challenges in selecting tourism services [4]. To reduce uncertainties, prospective tourists often search information prior to making buying decisions [5]. In particular, travelers take opinion leaders' advice into consideration [6] [7] [8]. Opinion leaders play the role as the leaders of information acceptance and product use [9] [10]. They generally engage in word-of-mouth communication and provide potential consumers service/product information and buying advice [7] [11]. Therefore, they are able to influence other consumers' attitude and behaviour [12].

Due to their influential power, opinion leaders become an important market segment that researchers and marketing managers strive to identify. The existing literature has identified numerous opinion leaders' attributes in terms of their personal characteristics and behavior patterns. Accordingly, opinion leaders are predisposed to be active and innovative, accept new things, share information with others and influence others in a preferred way [12] [13]. This seems to indicate a link between an individual's personality and opinion leadership.

Personality has been identified as a major psychological characteristic [14]. It is a "complex set of unique psychological qualities that influence an individual's characteristic patterns of behavior across different situations and over time" [15: p.371]. Goldenberg, Han, Lehmann and Hong [16] and Rose and Kim [17] assert that personality is one of the most important factors determining the role of opinion leaders. Ross [18: p.31] also suggests that "no more appropriate or useful study than personality as it illuminates tourist behavior". Given the important role of personality, it is therefore surprising that, to date, little empirical research addresses the role performed by personality in shaping travel opinion leaders.

The current study is an attempt to profile travel opinion leaders. More specifically, the main purpose is to propose the personality of travel opinion leaders. Considering that opinion leaders have behaviour and attitude characteristics [17] [19], it is postulated that there is a specific relationship between personality and travel opinion leaders. The current study relates the concept of travel opinion leaders to the Big-Five model which accounts for most of the variance in personality description in five dimensions—Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness [20].

Understanding who travel opinion leaders are will benefit the means through which tourism managers promote their products. One of the empirical contributions made by the current research is offering a new way to identify travel opinion leaders. Much existing literature on travel opinion leadership concentrated on opinion leaders' behaviors whereas the current study explicates their psychology traits. Another empirical contribution made by the current

study is to the marketing perspective. As the cost of tradition marketing campaigns has been increasing, tourism firms need to carefully develop marketing strategies. If tourism firms can identify travel opinion leaders, they are able to develop and appeal marketing campaigns directly to opinion leaders. Thus, tourism firms may not have to engage in large marketing activities and can exert their marketing effort more efficiently. For example, tourism firms can direct their communication efforts directly to travel opinion leaders.

Moreover, comparing with existing studies, the current study is unique in exploring the basic personality traits of travel opinion leaders. In particular, applying the model of Big Five personality enriches the theoretical understanding of the relationship between basic personality traits and travel opinion leaders. Using the Big Five model as a framework also makes it more easily to compare results from other domains because the Big Five model is one of the most frequently used personality concepts by researchers in many domains [21] [22].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Opinion Leaders

The concept of opinion leader has been mostly used in the diffusion of innovation model, which explains how new products and ideas diffuse within and between groups [13]. Opinion leaders are generally defined as individuals who can influence others' opinions and behavior in a desired way with relatively high frequency [13]. They are a critical segment for marketers to target because of their influence on other consumers [23]. Through word-of-mouth communication, opinion leaders deliver product information, provide comments and give advice and direction to potential consumers about search, purchase and use of products [12] [19]. Word-of-mouth marketing is an informal way of delivering product information among potential customers [24]. It is regarded to be more effective than tradition marketing [25] [26] [27]. Therefore, researchers and practitioners have been interested in identifying opinion leaders and investigating their characteristics.

Numerous studies have carried out to profile opinion leaders [17] [19], examine their interpersonal influence [28], and learn of their knowledge level [29]. The concept of opinion leader has also been applied to different kinds of areas, such as public affairs [30] [31], health care [32] [33], digital world [16] [34] [35] [36], and consumer products [10] [23] [37] [38] [39] [40]. Although the findings are different based on the type of products and domains, opinion leaders are found to be more active, innovative, self-confident and self monitoring. They occupy central positions in their social network and are willing to share information. Moreover, they get more involved in product, more actively search for information, have more influential power, use more information sources and possess more knowledge in their field. Finally, they are better at product judgment and are better communicators than their peers.

In the tourism literature, only limited studies examine travel opinion leaders. Jamrozy, Backman and Backman [41] studied a group of nature-based tourists. They found that tourists who were highly involved in tourism activities were more likely to be opinion leaders. These opinion leaders adopted more travel information sources and took more nature-based trips. Moreover, travel opinion leaders were recognized to be more sociable, read more travel magazines and take more and longer trips than non-opinion leaders [8]. Smerecnik and Andersen [42] identified that people with high levels of opinion leadership of hotels and resorts were highly correlated with sustainability innovations and environmental communication. Lee et al. [6] also reported that opinion leaders generally travel more and provided more useful information online. Finally, travel opinion leaders were more involved in travel planning and heavy users of social media. They were also more likely to accept innovative technology. They took more frequent and international travelling than their non-opinion leaders [43].

The above literature shows that individual characteristics could explain why opinion leaders are different from their peers. Despite extensive studies on the characteristics of opinion leaders in the marketing and tourism sectors, we still have little knowledge about who travel opinion leaders are. While there are increasing studies on travel opinion leadership, compared with research in general marketing, few studies have focused on this issue in the tourism sector. By understanding personality of travel opinion leaders, tourism managers can target opinion leaders and develop accordingly marketing activities to motivate positive word-of-mouth marketing.

2.2 Big-Five Model

The research of personality has attracted significant attention over years. Psychologists generally agree that personality is composed of various traits [44]. While individual similarities do exist, most investigations of personality are related to how people behave and think in different ways [14] [45]. In an effort to analyze human

personality, psychologists have developed various personality models [20] [46] [47] [48]. The Big-Five model is the most commonly used personality theories in both the management and tourism sectors [49] [50].

The Big Five model suggests that five major traits account for most of the variance in personality [20] [21] [51]. The first factor is extraversion. Traits related to extraversion encompass being outgoing, sociable, gregarious, expressive, communicative, talkative and active. The second factor is Agreeableness. Traits related to this factor encompass being courteous, likable, conforming, trusting and friendly. The third factor is Conscientiousness. Common traits of Conscientiousness include organized, responsible, careful, persistent and achievement-oriented. The fourth factor is Neuroticism. Neuroticism refers to being anxious, worried, embarrassed, depressed and emotional. The last factor is Openness to Experience. Traits commonly related to Openness to Experience include broad-minded, curious, original and inventive. The research evidence generally supports that the Big Five model is a robust, reliable and comprehensive used personality framework [21] [22].

The Big Five model has been extensively discussed in the management research. Some studies investigated the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and work-related outcomes [21] [52] [53] [54] [55]. The Big Five personality traits were also valid to explain career decisions [44] [56]. Several studies examined the influence of the Big Five personality attributes on service quality [57] [58] [59]. Further research relates the Big Five model to consumers' buying behavior, product personality [60], academic performance [22], and leisure activities [61] [62].

The studies of personality traits have also been widely conducted in the tourism sector. The literature focuses on the relationship between personality traits and selection of vacation destinations, travel decisions, travel preference, travel style, market segmentation and tourism behaviour [63] [64] [65] [66] [67]. Some literature emphasizes the influence of personality on work-related outcomes [52] [68]. Another major line of research uses the personality traits from Big Five model as the theoretical basis. For example, Faullant, Matzler and Mooradian [69] studied the linkage between emotion and personality of mountaineers. They found that more extraverted mountaineers were likely to experience joy while more neurotic mountaineers tended to experience fear.

Moreover, Tracey, Sturman and Tews [70] provided evidence that conscientiousness could predict job performance of frontline employees of restaurants. In particular, conscientiousness was better at predicting job performance for experienced employees. Ariffin, Ahmad and Ishak's [71] research showed that openness was a significant personality profile to identify individual meeting planners. The more open meeting planners, the more likely a novel destination would be selected. Teng [50] used senior students as samples and found that extroversion was a significant personality trait to predict students' attitudes towards hospitality jobs. Young and Corsun [51] reported that the Big Five model could significantly influence stressor-strain relationship in the hospitality context. Barrash and Costen [72] provided evidence that frontline employees who were agreeable were more likely to satisfy customers. Finally, Sohn and Lee [73], adding Honesty-Humility to the original five factors, found that employees from Korean tourism companies were different according to the personality. Extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness were identified to have impacts on emotional labor.

2.3 Personality and Travel Opinion Leaders

In a search of published studies in the marketing and tourism literature, few studies specifically addressed the relationship between personality and opinion leadership. Of these, two empirical studies investigated personality of opinion leaders but none was attempted to investigate the personality of travel opinion leaders. Robertson and Myers [74] used California Psychological Inventory to measure personality of opinion leaders in appliances, clothing and food domains. Their results demonstrated a weak relationship between personality and opinion leaders. The study conducted by Gnambs and Batinic [38] using the Big-Five model to profile opinion leaders in movies, literature and Internet domains revealed that opinion leaders were characterized by extraversion and non-neuroticism. The relationship between openness and opinion leadership was not statistically significant. The authors argued in their hypotheses that opinion leaders were not conscientious and agreeable. This argument was supported by their results.

Clearly, results of previous studies demonstrated that personality of opinion leaders differed across sectors. No evidence was found in the existing literature with respect to the power of Big Five personality traits to predict travel opinion leaders. The current study focused on the travel market and attempted to propose the personality of travel opinion leaders. This makes a direct contribution to the body of knowledge on tourism opinion leadership and enriches the knowledge of opinion leadership from the perspective of the tourism industry.

2.4 Extraversion and Travel Opinion Leaders

Extraversion is a trait associated with being outgoing, communicative, active and sociable. It is the personality measuring the extent of social interaction a person prefers [51] [57]. Due to an outgoing trait, extraverted people feel comfortable to interact and develop a social relationship with others [75]. They enjoy being with people and are communicative [76]. For travel opinion leaders, extraversion is a necessary personality trait in order for them to take action to influence others' behaviors. Research has shown that opinion leaders are socially active and outgoing people [77] [78] [79]. They are more willing to actively communicate with others [9] [12]. In particular, travel opinion leaders are socially active in communicating travel knowledge and information with others [80]. Therefore, the current study develops the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Travel opinion leaders have a higher degree of extraversion.

2.5 Agreeableness and Travel Opinion Leaders

Agreeable people are altruistic and enthusiastic to help others [51] [81]. Literature has shown that people who score high on agreeableness are more willing to share information with others [82]. For opinion leaders, agreeableness is an important trait. Opinion leaders like to interact with others [13]. They simply enjoy sharing information with others [8] [9]. When they have word-of-mouth communication with others, it is a form of information sharing and helpfulness [13]. Opinion leaders can make this communicative interaction become more accepted by opinion seekers due to opinion leaders' friendliness and trustworthiness [72]. The trait of agreeableness, therefore, can facilitate information sharing [81] [83]. Meanwhile, opinion seekers may be different in backgrounds and demands. It, as such, requires opinion leaders to have considerable skills in managing social interaction. Research has identified that agreeable people can make this social interaction become more active and positive because they generally seek cooperation with others and can get along with others in pleasant relationships [84]. Moreover, research has shown that travel opinion leaders actively search travel information [43] [80]. Agreeableness is a needed trait for travel opinion leaders because agreeable individuals are more likely to actively search travel information [85]. Accordingly, the current study develops the hypothesis as following.

Hypothesis 2: Travel opinion leaders have a higher degree of agreeableness.

2.6 Conscientiousness and Travel Opinion Leaders

Conscientiousness is related to traits such as being responsible, goal setting and organized [21] [85]. Literature has suggested that opinion leaders tend to search information from various sources [10]. This requires an ability to organize a great deal of information into a way that opinion leaders themselves can understand and absorb. After searching information, opinion leaders share information with opinion seekers. Opinion leaders may receive demands from opinion seekers with various demands. They need an ability to manage these demands. People who score high conscientiousness are better at managing multiple demands from different people because they are more organized and dutiful. They have a desire to get the job done correctly and to satisfy others' request [51] [52]. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that conscientiousness is a needed trait for opinion leaders. In addition, travel opinion leaders have been identified as active information searchers. They are more likely to search a variety of travel information [43] [80]. Tourism research has indicated that conscientious people tend to search more travel information to ensure the quality and accuracy of information [85]. Thus, a hypothesis is developed as below

Hypothesis 3: Travel opinion leaders have a higher degree of conscientiousness.

2.7 Neuroticism and Travel Opinion Leaders

Neuroticism is a negative set of emotion, such as nervousness, worry, embarrassment and anxiety [22] [49]. This emotional instability may result in a fluctuating willingness to interact with others [52]. Individuals with this inconsistent emotion may have weakened motivation to interact with others and help others [86] [87]. They also lack self-confidence about themselves and their abilities [41]. People who have the neurotic trait are less likely to become opinion leaders. Opinion leaders have stable emotion [27]. They feel self-confident and believe that they have abilities to influence their peers [88]. The trait of neuroticism will impede instead of facilitating the communication with others [87] [89]. Without proper communication abilities, travel opinion leaders are not able to effectively share information with opinion seekers [9] [90]. According to the above argument, the current study establishes the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: Travel opinion leaders have a lower degree of neuroticism.

2.8 Openness to Experience and Travel Opinion Leaders

Openness to experience generally is described as how much an individual is curious and innovative [41] [91]. These traits are associated with positive attitudes and individuals' readiness to learn new experiences [13] [21]. In general, open individuals have interests for new information and various experiences [92] [93]. They can be regarded as innovation-seekers [72]. They are comfortable with new information and like to try different services and products [23] [94]. After getting new informant and try new products, people with a high level of openness to experience like to share information and experience with others [95] [96]. For travel opinion leaders, openness to experience is the elementary personality. Travel opinion leaders have been identified as innovation-oriented people. They like to search updated information and explore new products [80] [86] [97]. Research has also shown that open individuals are more likely to share travel information with others [86] [97]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed.

Hypothesis 5: Travel opinion leaders have a higher degree of openness to experience.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sampling

The data was derived from a sample of tourists who visited Jiaosi, Yilan County, Taiwan. Jiaosi was chosen because it is famous for its hot springs and natural surroundings. It has been one of the most popular tourist destinations in Taiwan. A self-reported questionnaire method was employed to gather data. Potential respondents from two popular tour spots, including Jiaoxi Hot Springs Park and Linmei Shihpan Trail, were approached. Only those tourists who agreed to voluntarily participate in the current study were invited to complete the questionnaire. Initially, 300 questionnaires were delivered to respondents. A total of 271 (90.33%) valid questionnaires were returned.

3.2 Instrument

The survey instrument for the current study contained three sections. First, demographic data, such as gender and age, was collected. In the second section, the dependent variable, respondents' level of being travel opinion leaders, was measured by the 6-items scale developed by Jamrozy et al. [79]. Jamrozy et al. [79] report an accepted reliability (Cronbach α = 0.88). The 44-item form of Big-Five Inventory was used in the third section to measure the independent variables, five Big Five personality traits [98]. It examined the Big Five by five questions per factor. A 5-point Likert scale (from 1= strongly disagree/dissatisfied to 5= strongly agree/satisfied) was employed to measure each item of Big Five scale.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Of the 271 respondents, 119 (43.9%) were male and 152 (56.1%) were female. The most frequently occurring age group was above 41 years old (41.7%). 7.7% were under 20 years old. 27.3% were between 21 and 25 years old, 6.3% were between 26 and 30 years old, 8.5% were between 31 and 35 years old, and 8.5% were between 36 and 40 years old.

The Pearson correlation among variables is presented in Table 1. No high correlations were shown. As such, there was no potential problem of multicollinearity among variables. The current study went on to perform regressions on five traits separately. Hypothesis 1 proposed that opinion leaders were more likely to be extraverted people. Results of Table 2 (Column I) showed that this relationship was statistically significant ($\beta = .327, p < .01$). Similarly, the relationship between opinion leadership and agreeableness was statistically positive ($\beta = .291, p < .01$). Moreover, Hypothesis 3 expected that opinion leaders were conscientious people. The results displayed (Column III of Table 2) that opinion leadership was positively and significantly related to conscientiousness ($\beta = .115, p < .05$). Hypothesis 4 assumed that the relationship between opinion leadership and neuroticism was negative. The initial outcome (Column IV) provided supportive evidence ($\beta = -.122, p < .05$). In addition, the outcomes demonstrated that the hypothesized relationship between opinion leadership and openness was significantly positive ($\beta = .365, p < .01$).

Table 1. Correlations

	Opinion Leadership	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Opinion Leadership	1					
Extraversion	.401**	1				
Agreeableness	.330**	.366**	1			
Conscientiousness	.146*	.301**	.316**	1		
Neuroticism	-.156*	-.564**	-.487**	-.444**	1	
Openness	.397**	.331**	.195**	.125*	-.185**	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2. Regression results

	Independent variable = Opinion Leadership coefficient						Hypothesis Accept/Reject
	(I)	(II)	(III)	(IV)	(V)	(VI)	
Constant	2.566**	2.534**	3.221**	3.952**	2.361**	.571	
Extraversion	.327**					.262**	Accept
Agreeableness		.291**				.220**	Accept
Conscientiousness			.115*			.021	Reject
Neuroticism				-.122*		.160**	Reject
Openness					.365**	.254**	Accept
F-ratio	51.668**	32.910**	5.886*	6.695*	50.404**	22.020**	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

To ensure the robustness of results, the current study conducted a regression analysis, including simultaneously five traits. Column VI of Table 2 showed that extraversion, agreeableness and openness remained significantly positive. As such, Hypothesis 1, 2 and 5 were accepted. On the other hand, the influence of conscientiousness on leadership opinion was positive but become not significant. As such, Hypothesis 3 was rejected. Moreover, neuroticism significantly influenced opinion leadership but the relationship become positive. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was rejected. In sum, the outcomes supported that opinion leaders were more likely to be those people with the personality of extraversion, agreeableness and openness.

The current results have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the current study is one of the few studies to explore the relationship between travel opinion leaders and personality by using the Big Five model. Given the limited studies on this issue, the results of the current study contribute to the literature on not only tourism marketing but also tourist behaviors. In practical terms, the current results can help those tourism firms to understand the characteristics of opinion leaders. With the knowledge of personality traits of travel opinion leaders, tourism firms can easily identify opinion leaders. As such, they are able to appeal marketing activities directly to opinion leaders.

There are two limitations of current study. First, the current research examined the hypothesized relationships by using a sample of tourists in the Taiwanese tourism spots. The generalizability of the outcomes to other countries needs further investigation. Future studies conducted in different countries may find that different tourists have different personality. In addition, it should be noted that the current research only examines the personality of travel opinion leaders. Future research may study other psychological traits, such as emotional intelligence, to extend the current literature.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The major purpose of the current study is to understand what the personality of travel opinion leaders is. It is one of the initial studies on the personality of travel opinion leaders by using the Big-Five framework. Results show that travel opinion leaders have the personality of extraversion, agreeableness and openness. It makes relevant contributions to the literature on travel opinion leadership and personality studies.

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