

An Examination of the Technological Innovation Diffusion Among the Rural Tourism Microentrepreneurs in Economic Development



Yasong Wang

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

The current study focuses on how rural tourism microentrepreneurs adopt and utilize the online tourism marketplace as an innovation example of information and communication technology (ICT) to promote their business, the study aims to explore the barriers and constraints they face in engaging such technology with the community-based tourism development initiative. By utilizing the case study methodology, the in-depth interviews with a phenomenological approach were conducted. The data analysis results indicate that unlike the previous research, the findings in the present study demonstrate the lifestyle and family-centered goals are the primary motivation for rural microentrepreneurs to adopt innovation. The findings of present study indicate that it is important for rural regional developers and policy makers to take such primary motivations into consideration when they develop plans of advocating the adoption of technological innovation for rural economic growth.

Keywords: rural tourism entrepreneurs, information and communication technology, and economic development

Yasong Wang is with the department of Hospitality Management, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA. Address author correspondence to Yasong Wang at yswang@iup.edu.

Introduction

Tourism as one of the largest economic sectors in the world plays a significant role in creating job opportunities and generating different types of income for the host communities (WTTC, 2018). In particular, the promotion of small-scale tourism is intuitively perceived as a suitable form of economic development for rural areas (Eadington & Smith, 1992; Echter, 1995; Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000). As Getz, Carlsen, and Morrison (2004) asserted, small-scale tourism business has been dominant in rural and peripheral areas “because of traditional land-owning patterns and the impracticalities of operating larger corporations in marginal economies” (p.2). Nevertheless, due to the unique characteristics of tourism industry, its primary products, which are the intangible service and experiences, unlike durable goods cannot be physically demonstrated or inspected before purchasing. Therefore, in tourism market, the decision of purchasing tourism products is almost exclusively based on representations and descriptions provided by the dominant leading corporations and other intermediaries, because they obtain and control the direct access to the target market through the traditional tourism distribution system (Buhalis, 2000). Their dominant control in the marketplace makes it difficult for local people to raise their own voices in tourism project design, planning and management. Some researchers have reported that tourism is often a mechanism that objectifies heritages and local identities and thus transforms host communities into passive objects or tourees (Cohen, 2001; Seba, 2012). As a result, by taking this one side of story as granted, the majority of research in

tourism field has been built upon such top-down and unbalanced development approach, but it has neglected the rapidly- emerging force from the host side in shaping the development path of local community.

Since the late 1990s, with the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT), in particular, the wide adoption of the Internet and the World Wide Web, it becomes possible for host communities to engage directly with consumers and challenge the role of intermediaries by displaying their offerings globally using multimedia interfaces (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Smith & Jenner, 1998). Since timely and accurate information satisfying consumers’ needs is always the key for the success of business in the tourism industry, the host communities could take the advantage of ICT by directly providing the potential customers with the updated information about destinations without interference of intermediaries. Meanwhile, by directly building the information channels with the host communities through ICT, travelers cannot only be empowered by the timely and accurate information, but also create the personalized travel experiences in a cost-effective way (Buhalis, 2000; Buhalis & Law, 2008). Thus, the effective use of ICT is critical to the host communities for their business viability in the modern tourism market. However, studies have shown that small and medium-sized enterprises as well as independent, seasonal and family run, which are composed of 80 per cent of the tourism industry workforce at the global level (International Labour Organization, 2010), are getting marginalized in the tourism market because they lack both resources and expertise

to take advantage of the emergent technologies (Buhalis, 1999, 2003; Morrison & Thomas, 1999; Mgijima & Flowerday, 2012; Standing, Borbely, & Vasudavan, 1999).

Nevertheless, such adverse situations those small firms are facing do not mean they cannot take advantage of the rapid development of ICT in building their business success. On the contrary, there is evidence suggesting that some innovative microentrepreneurs are increasingly creating their properties' presence on Internet and utilizing interactivity as part of their marketing strategy (Buhalis and Keeling, 1999; Martin 2004; Thomas, Shaw, & Page 2011). As Poon (1990, p.118) states, "there will be no place for the small stand-alone participants, but the world can become the oyster for the small, innovative, flexible and networked enterprises". It means that microentrepreneurs need support from public tourism organizations as well as collaboration of local tourism enterprises to build networks of shared costs-resource-information, which would pool resources and share development and operation costs (Buhalis and Cooper, 1998; Buhalis 2000). Thus, in order to benefit the prosperity of both local enterprises and destinations, community-based online tourism marketplace systems should be established to enable micro enterprises to distribute their products through global distribution systems and the Internet (Archdale, 1993; Collins, Buhalis, and Peters, 2003). More importantly, such online marketplace systems provide the infrastructure for distribution of tourism products and therefore enable smaller players to obtain a certain degree of intra-channel power, while competing for profit margins with larger

competitors. Meanwhile, concerning, mobile and wireless technologies, which have a greater penetration even to digitally excluded communities due to ICT development (Buhalis and Law, 2008), should be a vital part in building such systems.

Despite the substantial impact of such online marketplace on the prosperity of rural microenterprises, it is unknown how feasible it is for the rural microentrepreneurs to adopt such technology-oriented development approach and what are the challenges for them to apply it in their business. In particular, concerning the underdeveloped infrastructure in rural areas and the technological disadvantage of micro enterprises which have comparatively more constraints in obtaining easy access to new technologies (Tiesen, Wright, & Turner, 2001), it warrants an in-depth examination of the difficulties the rural microentrepreneurs have experienced in adopting ICT solution, such as online marketplace, for their business viability.

The Study of Technological Innovation Diffusion Among the Rural Tourism Microentrepreneurs

The current research is built upon new economic growth theory; sometimes referred to as endogenous growth theory. Although the theory is built upon the neoclassical growth theory of Solow (1956) and Swan (1956) who propose the long-run economic growth rate is determined by the scientific and technological progress, it argues that the technological progress is not separate from and independent of economic forces. On the contrary, the theory suggests that "the eco-

conomic growth is an endogenous outcome of an economic system, not the result of forces that impinge from outside” (Romer, 1994, p.3), because the technological progress takes place through innovations, which are the result of economic activities. Therefore, a key feature of new growth theory is to make technological change and innovation endogenous to the regional growth model. Building on Arrow’s (1962) “learning-by-doing” framework, Romer (1994) incorporates technical change as an endogenous parameter within a competitive equilibrium model of economic growth. He asserts that “the aggregate rate of discovery is endogenous...is still determined by things the people do” (Romer, 1994, p.13). In other words, the regional economic growth heavily relies on the opportunities available for local people to create and diffuse technological innovation.

The present study targets at community-based tourism which aims to provide benefits to local populations by encouraging local people’s participation in planning, implementing and managing tourism development. With the development of globalization and proliferation of Internet application in tourism industry, it is evident that local communities should make any effort to get involved with the application of such new trend in their tourism development so as to improve their wellbeing and achieve sustainable development progress. In particular, for less-developed rural areas where face more constraints in obtaining the necessary development resources. It has become imperative to explore the barriers in adopting the new ICT in rural and less-developed areas among the micro tourism enterprises so as to maximize

the positive impact of ICT on the prosperity of host communities.

The present study selected the participants from the economically-depressed rural areas of Pennsylvania. Based on the data from U.S. Census Bureau, the poverty rate in rural Pennsylvania has increased from 11.7% in 2000 to 14% in 2010 and has reached its highest level since 1970. Such unprecedented poverty level in rural Pennsylvania calls for the examination of current economic development alternatives. Although tourism is the second largest industry in Pennsylvania, the benefits generated from tourism are distributed unevenly. Evidence reveals that tourism benefits are clustered in privileged areas of the state and are not trickling down to economically depressed rural areas (Holoviak, 2012). Specifically, in the selected study site, which is in the southwestern part of Pennsylvania, the high unemployment rate and huge percentage of under-poverty-line population require to leverage the force of tourism as a catalyst for equitable economic revitalization in rural Pennsylvania.

To truly leverage the force of tourism as a catalyst for equitable economic revitalization in rural Pennsylvania, it is necessary to circumvent current retail monopolies and give local micro-entrepreneurs access to markets. Research has identified that community-based tourism is a vital developmental alternative to provide local society with direct and long-term benefits by getting local residents involved in tourism development (Matarrita-Cascante, Brennan, & Luloff, 2010; Tao & Wall, 2009). Meanwhile, tourists are increasingly interested in services and products delivered by real local people and they want to

know that their expenditures make a direct contribution to the well-being for their hosts. Therefore, a platform which can provide such direct market link between suppliers and customers is necessary for economically depressed rural areas to obtain equal development opportunity.

With the development of ICT, it becomes possible for host communities to engage directly with consumers and challenge the role of intermediaries (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Recent research has found that by employing weblogs local people can speak and actually define which aspects of their heritages/identities are suitable for sharing with visitors and to generate needed income (Wang & Morais, 2014). In other words, by constructing such direct communication or product supply channels between hosts and guests through ICT, local people are strengthening their control of tourism development in their own communities. In particular, the fragmentation of the rural tourism market has made the internet ideal for promoting rural micro enterprises online (Buhalis & Murphy, 2009). However, the research in tourism and hospitality field about this new development trend is still in the infancy stage. In particular, it is unknown what major barriers that rural micro enterprises are facing when they engage in such community-based tourism development initiative.

The present research focuses on an online tourism marketplace (i.e., www.peoplefirsttourism.com) that mediates interactions and transactions between tourists looking for services from their home or mobile web browsers and local tourism products suppliers in rural host communities. By examining how rural microentrepreneurs adopt

and utilize this online tourism marketplace to promote their business, the study aims to explore the barriers and constraints they face in engaging with such community-based tourism development initiative. The study findings can provide an in-depth understanding about the determining factors influencing the applications of ICT among rural microentrepreneurs in their business. Although tourism scholars have agreed that using technology and the internet is becoming inevitable for rural micro enterprises, the research in adoption of ICT innovation among rural microentrepreneurs and how ICT can be more applicable for rural micro enterprises is rare. In particular, since the level of economic activities is relatively lower in the less developed rural areas, it warrants further study on how to facilitate the adoption of innovation by mitigating the primary barriers to innovation adoption in these areas. Meanwhile, the findings of present study can facilitate policy makers and regional development planners in developing policies and strategies to facilitate the diffusion of innovations and improve ICT engagement among rural microentrepreneurs.

METHODOLOGY

The present study seeks to understand how rural microentrepreneurs adopt an online tourism marketplace (i.e., www.peoplefirsttourism.com) as an economic development initiative and identify the barriers in this adoption process. To accomplish the study objective, a case study methodology has been utilized. According to Yin (2009), case studies are optimal when seeking to answer the questions of why and how certain decisions are taken. Such methodology provides a

deeper-level understanding of the social processes in a place or places by interviewing informants and conducting participant observation (Denzin, 1989).

Twenty-two local microentrepreneurs were invited to participate in the study and eighteen of them accepted the invitation. Methods of participant observation included the following: having conversations with participants; working with participants together to set up their webpages on the online tourism marketplace to make their products accessible to customers; and observing how participants use the online tourism marketplace. The interviews were conducted by using open-ended questions focusing on participants' experiences of using the online tourism marketplace. A phenomenological approach based on in-depth interviews was employed. Phenomenological studies examine the meaning of human experiences through the detailed descriptions provided by the people being studied (Creswell, 1994). Sensitizing concepts were used in order to provide a general sense of reference, or direction for the analysis of the data (Patton, 1990) including the concepts of barriers. The interviews followed a semi-structured format in which the main topics covered remained the same, but the order of questions varied between the interviews. Each question was followed by a series of probes designed to obtain a fuller description of experiences and more detailed responses.

The process of data analysis began as soon as the initial interviews were completed and it lasted throughout the duration of the study. The data were analyzed using constant comparison technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, the author

read interview transcripts to develop a broader understanding of the topic. Emergent major themes were color coded to aid in the identification and consolidation of findings. Subsequently, each transcript were re-read several times by the author in order to identify sub-themes and to ascertain that they truly represent the information gathered during the course of the interviews. New observations, emerging themes and issues that surfaced during the interviews were followed up in subsequent conversations, which facilitate verification of external consistency of the previously obtained material. After the completion of all interviews, the transcripts were re-read once again and relevant information that confirmed as well as contradicted emerging themes were identified.

Trustworthiness, credibility and confirmability of data analysis were achieved through reflexivity and triangulation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). By contrasting identified themes from the interview data with notes made during the participant observation process, reflexivity was reached. The researcher located consistency among the themes discovered in both types of data collection methods. Triangulation was accomplished by sharing and discussing findings with academic colleagues and research assistants when interview data were analyzed and interpreted (Flick, 2005; Wolcott, 1994).

In order to improve the validity of the study, particularly to enhance the accuracy and credibility of interview content and its interpretation, the author double checked the informants' view. Interview transcripts were sent to the interviewees for verification and feedback. While infor-

mants' verification is a standard practice used to increase the internal validity of the data, because interviewees can read the transcripts and assure themselves that the sensitive information that they provide is not altered in any way. Furthermore, in order to test for the internal validity of the data, themes that emerged from the study were presented to selected interviewees and their comments and suggestions were followed in the data analysis stage. Finally, external consultants who did not have connection with this study were also invited to examine whether the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data in order to help in assessing reliability of the qualitative data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

By being involved with participants in establishing the online tourism marketplace for their business, having conversations with them and their family members, and observing their daily activities, a basic understanding about participants' background, purposes for their own business, and major concerns for their future development was formed. First, all of participants were small business owners and the types of business are very diversified which include wine making, crafts making, children books writing, farming, and restaurants operations. Second, the most popular reasons for participants to own their business include taking control of their own destinies and inheriting family business. Third, participants also demonstrated their primary concerns about their future business growth. Their major concerns can be categorized into three main aspects.

First, some participants felt lack of support from neighbors or local community because they were living in the isolated rural area and there were not a lot of neighbors. In particular, they demonstrated strong interest in knowing how online marketplace could help them reach more potential customers, concerning the difficulty to get advertise known to larger market due to expensive advertising fees and their business was located far away from big communities and towns. The second most commonly shared concern was the challenges from government. For example, one of the participants reported that

The biggest challenges are from government, every time when government needs money it hits small business. The local law enforcement has started to focus on small game of chance licenses. Because I have a liquor license, the liquor control enforcement division of state police is making me to enforce their law to make sure the people to come to have events here to have small game of chance licenses. So, they cannot do 50/50 anymore, do ruffles, can't do basket ruffles, all these non-profit organizations would have meeting here to raise money for their events now requires to go through small game of chance licensing, and a lot of groups are small. That's example of regulations asking me and hold me being accountable if they have it. If they do not have paperwork, I will be fined. The biggest change I am facing right now is the property taxes, the local government is taking more tax from local business. Therefore, my property tax goes up. The govern-

ment is holding me back from growing. The more employees I have the more regulations I have to comply with. It seems I am buried by the government stuff.

Another participant expressed the similar concern:

Various kinds of tax on a single item and overwhelming information about tax regulation need to know, difficulty to follow the guidelines in order to avoid breaking the tax law and being fined. Hard to find timely help to complete the tax claims on time. New information and stuff about tax issue come every year. Various kinds of tax on a single item and overwhelming information about tax regulations in different states make small business less competitive. Because PA does not become a reciprocal state among the major wine-making states in the U.S., such as CA, WA, and NY, wine-makers in PA cannot be waived the tax if they sell their wines to those states.

Last, most participants also shared their difficulty in competing with the big corporations and training the current employees. Overall, the observation findings provide a glimpse of participants' background, the reasons for pursuing on their current business, and their major concerns.

Meanwhile, the in-depth interviews provide more information about participants' perception about the primary barriers to prevent them from adopting the possible technology, such as the online marketplace in this study. Based on the analysis of data from interview transcripts, two major themes were identified from the interview data. First, most participants reported that they felt the

online market place required them to spend a lot of time to track and monitor customers' requests and inquiries. They demonstrated the reluctance to adopt the online market place as a primary tool to promote their business in the future, because of the large amount of time they have to consume every day and distract them from other critical issues, such as family responsibilities. For example, one of the participants, who is a farm owner, shared the following comments in the interviews

During the harvesting season, I and my family have to work whole day in the farm and it is quite tough to keep answering any questions from the visitors who plan to visit my farm. In particular, I've three kids to take care of and it's quite hard to have enough time to respond visitors' requests or inquiries in a timely manner. I think the biggest challenge to keep using this online marketplace is the limited time I have.

Such finding exposed how the characteristics of rural microentrepreneurs' daily life affect the adoption to ICT. As previous research identified that the rural micro enterprises are characterized by small and family-centered operations (Fleischer & Pizam, 1997; Galston & Baehler, 1995). Such family-oriented structure and the conflict between business development and family responsibilities directly influence the owners of rural micro enterprises in the process of innovation adoption. Meanwhile, unlike the previous research (i.e. Ankar & Walden, 2001; Main, 2002), the participants did not consider lack of resources, lack of skilled employees, and lack of easy to use technology adapted to their business as the barriers to cause the limited adoption of

ICT in their business.

Another theme demonstrated in the interviews focuses on the limited benefits perceived by participants from the adoption of ICT. Many participants reported that the profit improvements achieved through the adoption of ICT could not outweigh their sacrifice of lifestyle. In other words, they believed it would be more beneficial if the ICT could make their daily schedule more flexible and create more free time and family time for them. For instance, one bakery shop owner made such comments

“The reason for me to quit my previous job and open this bakery shop is I hope I could have more time to take care of my little kids. My current customers, most of them, are my friends and other people introduced by my friends. I am very interested in the possibility of letting more people know my bakery shop and patronize my business through using this online market place. However, I hope such change will not affect my personal time staying with my kids.”

This finding echoes the previous rural tourism research which identified that the rural tourism and hospitality sectors dominated by small family and owner-operated business were motivated primarily by lifestyle and family-centered goals (Getz & Carlsen, 2000; McKercher, 1998). Meanwhile, such finding also supports other researchers' argument that the lifestyle motivations rather than economic growth as a primary motivation are considered as constraints for regional economies (Atejevic & Doorne, 2000; Mehraliyev, 2014). In other words, to make technological change and innovation endogenous to the

regional growth model, it is necessary to take the lifestyle motivations as a major concern, in particular, for rural micro enterprises.

Based on the data collected from both observation and semi-structured interviews, the findings in the present study provide an in-depth understanding about what the participants perceive as their major challenges for future development and barriers for them to adopt technology innovation and why they consider those factors influence their decision on how they develop their business. The findings in the present study provide an alternative way of understanding about the economic development approach which is built upon innovation adoption and technology progress. In other words, to facilitate the economic development in the host communities by fostering the innovation adoption among local rural micro enterprises, the policy makers and economic developers need to consider how new technologies or innovation could help people to pursue on their favorite lifestyles and make a match between their business growth and family responsibility fulfillment. In particular, going beyond the traditional thesis that innovation generation and adoption is controlled by the level of economic activities, the findings of present study demonstrate the necessity of exposing the influences of other non-economic causes or factors on innovation adoption. In addition, by identifying the unique types of barriers to innovation adoption in the economic-depressed rural areas, the present study may encourage more in-depth research on identifying the primary barriers to innovation adoption in the developing regions and countries.

CONCLUSION

Tourism has been an important tool in rural areas for economic growth. In particular, the promotion of small-scale tourism is intuitively perceived as a suitable form of economic development for rural areas. Meanwhile, the new economic growth theory credits the regional economic growth on the opportunities available for local people to create and diffuse technological innovation. With the development of globalization and proliferation of Internet usage in tourism market, it is important to understand how to make ICT more favorable for rural microentrepreneurs to adopt. By actively adopting and applying ICT in their business, such new technological development would make significant contribution to the local economy. However, to make technological change and innovation endogenous to the regional growth model, it is necessary to identify the major barriers to cause the limited adoption of ICT among the rural micro enterprises. The data analysis results in the present study indicate that unlike the previous research (i.e. Anckar & Walden, 2001; Main, 2001), the participants did not consider lack of resources, lack of skilled employees, and lack of easy to use technology adapted to their business as the barriers to cause the limited adoption of ICT in their business. However, the findings in the present study demonstrate the lifestyle and family-centered goals are the primary motivations for rural microentrepreneurs to adopt innovation.

Such results provide a unique point of view about how rural microentrepreneurs make decisions to adopt and apply ICT in their business. By knowing their major interests and concerns in

employing ICT to enhance their business growth, the rural regional developers and policy makers may create and implement more effective measures and policies to advocate and facilitate the utilization of ICT so as to encourage local people to create and diffuse technological innovation. Meanwhile, participants also demonstrated their primary concerns about their future business growth. Their major concerns include lack of support from neighbors or local community because they were living in the isolated rural area and there were not a lot of neighbors; the challenges from government, and their difficulty in competing with the big corporations and training the current employees. Such identified issues provide useful information for future economic development in the less-developed rural areas. In particular, such findings create the possible dialogue opportunities for policy makers and local small business owners. By taking care of such primary concerns, rural regional developers and policy makers may provide more necessary and effective support and assistance to local business, and eventually, locate and shape a sustainable way of economic development which can be endogenous to the local growth model.

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