

# **The Case of BeReal and Spontaneous Online Social Networks and Their Impact on Tourism: Research Agenda**

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# **The Case of BeReal and Spontaneous Online Social Networks and Their Impact on Tourism: Research Agenda**

The importance of online social networks (OSN) in tourism has been well documented in the literature. Most OSN share common characteristics. One of them is allowing users and companies to extensively plan and edit their posts. Recently, a new type of OSN has emerged: spontaneous online social networks (SOSN). These SOSN can be stand-alone products (e.g., BeReal) or features added to existing OSN. This research note provides an initial approach to SOSN and how they may change the dynamics of travellers and tourism companies. It provides a research agenda concerning the growth of SOSN.

Keywords: online social networks; BeReal; Facebook; Instagram

## **Introduction**

Online social networks (OSN) are pervasive in every economic sector, and their importance to tourism has been well documented (e.g., Bilgihan et al., 2016). They inspire travellers, allow them to make more informed decisions (Zhou & Xue, 2022), serve as communication channel between service providers and customers (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020), and permit companies to evaluate their employees' performance.

Most well-known OSN (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram) share common characteristics. One is that participants, whether users or businesses, can extensively plan and edit what they will post. Edited pictures and real-time video filters (e.g., TikTok's Bold Glamour filter) are the summons of this feature. Most OSN applications include enhancement features. As artificial intelligence improves, it almost impossible to tell that a filter is being used. For companies, notably DMOs, publishing involves frequently hiring professionals who take several pictures and videos and edit

them extensively before publishing them. In some cases, this process can entail weeks of work to generate content for one post. Even if the selection of an appropriate influencer is considered, each post can be a process of several months. This extensive preparation is one of the main reasons for the reduced credibility of OSN (Kreling et al., 2022).

In contrast, a new type of OSN is emerging: spontaneous online social networks (SOSN). This research note provides a first approach to this new type of OSN, examines their main characteristics, and proposes a research agenda.

## **Literature review**

### ***Social media and types of OSN***

Social media has become a popular term that encompasses different types of media: (i) social networking sites (e.g., Facebook); (ii) media-sharing sites (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok); (iii) social review sites (e.g., TripAdvisor); (iv) blogs (e.g., WordPress and Medium); (v) discussion sites (e.g., Reddit and Quora); (vi) bookmarking and content curation networks (e.g., Pinterest and Flipboard); and (vii) interest-based networks (e.g., Goodreads). In many cases, one site belongs to several categories. For example, Facebook is a social networking site, a media-sharing site, a discussion site, and an interest-based network. This research note focuses on what are commonly defined as OSN, which refer to (i) social networking sites and (ii) media-sharing sites.

There are two basic types of OSN: those that allow users to prepare the content, referred to as non-spontaneous social networks and which include most of the known OSN (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok), and those that impose certain conditions to force users to publish content spontaneously,

which will be referred to as spontaneous social networks. These SOSN can be stand-alone products, of which BeReal is the main current representative, features added to existing OSN (e.g., Instagram Candid Stories, TikTok Now, Facebook Messenger Roll Call), or even ways that users find to present their content (e.g., the #real hashtag on TikTok). In SOSN, once users receive a notification, they have a short time to take a picture and post it.

### ***Trust in online sources***

Authenticity, trust and credibility of online sources and how trust affects travellers' choices are both ongoing topics in the literature (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Kreling et al., 2022; Pop et al., 2022; Tham et al., 2020; Yoo & Choi, 2021). Authenticity has been found to be an antecedent of trust (Kim & Kim, 2020). In turn, trust has been found to have a significant impact on every step of the customer journey, from trip preparation to service purchase (Pop et al., 2022). It is therefore important to understand how trustworthy and authentic a channel is perceived to be.

Social media have been found to have low credibility, essentially due to the possibility of extensive content preparation and elaboration (Kreling et al., 2022). That is, there is a lack of authenticity (Tham et al., 2020), which in turn undermines its influence on travellers' choices. In this sense, Kreling et al. (2022) found that Stories on Instagram had higher authenticity than Posts because they were less elaborated, and Zheng et al. (2022) found that the interactivity, vividness, authenticity, and immediacy of live video streaming had a positive impact on trust.

### ***OSN in tourism***

OSN have been extensively used in tourism by travellers, travel companies, and public organisations. Travellers use OSN to find inspiration from others' publications, to plan

their trips (Zhou & Xue, 2022), and to find useful information (Barbe et al., 2020). Travel companies use social networks as a marketing tool (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020), to generate brand awareness (Abbasi et al., 2022) and to listen to customers' desires and preferences (LaTour & Brant, 2022). DMOs have used OSN to build destination image (Park & Stepchenkova, 2022), for branding purposes (Lund et al., 2018) and to influence tourists (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). However, this influence has been limited due to the aforementioned low credibility of social media (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Tham et al., 2020).

From a research perspective, OSN have been used as data sources: Facebook (e.g., Önder et al., 2020), Instagram (e.g., Gon, 2021), Twitter (e.g., Dietz et al., 2020), and TikTok (e.g., Zhu et al., 2022).

### ***Spontaneous online social networks—SOSN***

The basic characteristic of SOSN is that they try to guarantee that the content available is as real as possible. Therefore, when users receive a notification, they have a short time (e.g., two minutes in BeReal) to post. BeReal requests that users take pictures with both smartphone cameras. Sometimes, this content can be posted after the established timeframe, but the platform will flag it. Filters and editing tools are usually not available. Therefore, content is as unfiltered as possible.

Some other characteristics currently present in some of these SOSN are likely to evolve over time. For example, users can comment on other users' publications but cannot “like” them. Publications are ephemeral (e.g., 24 hours). This feature, combined with platforms impeding screen capture, attempts to ensure that users can freely post content that will not be accessible in the future, similar to Instagram's Stories (Kreling et al., 2022). Reciprocity is the norm, thus removing the concept of followers.

## **Research propositions and agenda regarding spontaneous social networks**

The emergence of SOSN leads to several research questions that need to be answered as these networks are becoming increasingly popular. For the travel and tourism sector, the following research questions are suggested:

RQ1: Will DMOs and other tourism operators be interested in using SOSN? Under which conditions and principles should they be used?

The evolution of most OSN (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn) has been similar. Initially, they were oriented to final users, and as they grew, companies and popular users were allowed to have differentiated profiles. Probably something similar will happen with SOSN. Therefore, relevant questions are how organisations should use SOSN, when should they start using them, and how and what they should do when and if specific profiles for companies are enabled. There is also the question of whether SOSN will be of value to tourism organisations. If real content is shown, bad weather, noisy environments, parties with few participants, and full beaches could discourage potential travellers. Publishing timeframes can be another challenge for organisations. In summary, tourism organisations must balance the pros and cons of SOSN before using them.

RQ2: What are the main differences between content published in SOSN and content published in other OSN? How are travellers using the content included in SOSN?

As has been explained, content published in SOSN differs significantly from content published in traditional OSN. Additionally, most current SOSN guarantee that content will not be available for long, in most cases only for one day. This has implications for how travellers can use the content. For example, they will not be able to

search for previously published content when planning a trip or when searching for useful information about the destination.

RQ3: How will travellers perceive the content included in SOSN?

How travellers perceive content that tourism organisations post on OSN has been extensively researched. However, their perceptions of content posted on SOSN are currently unknown. Based on the definition of SOSN, it can be expected that travellers will perceive content on these social networks as more authentic and therefore more credible than content on OSN. This could mean that the content in SOSN will have a greater impact on the customer's journey than the content published in other OSN. However, how tourism organisations organise their publishing strategies could significantly influence travellers' perceptions. For example, a DMO may have different users connected to its SOSN account to choose who will post content each day. Systems may appear where content is automatically uploaded from smartphones placed in ideal locations.

There are also other issues that deserve research attention. These include the role of influencers and paid content in SOSN, the analysis of publications by minors in SOSN and possible threats to their privacy, and the differences in publications depending on the type of destinations and on the demographics (e.g., gender, age, cultural variables) of those publishing. Also, and once the novelty of SOSN wears off, whether users continue to engage with them, especially if every day they carry out similar activities and, therefore, they believe their postings will be very similar to previous ones. Finally, whether the use of SOSN will have a seasonal effect, this is, if the applications will be used more when people are frequently outdoors (e.g., in summer

and during holidays) than when they are frequently indoors (e.g., in winter). From a methodological point of view, SOSN, like OSN, are well suited to research based on data downloads and quantitative methods, as well as to methods such as netnography.

## **Conclusions**

The emergence of a new type of online social network, called spontaneous online social networks (SOSN), poses significant challenges for travellers and tourism businesses.

This manuscript presents a research agenda based on three research questions related to these challenges. The main issues are whether tourism organisations should use this type of social network and how travellers will perceive the content posted on SOSN compared to content posted on OSN. Of particular importance will be the level of trust users place in SOSN content and the impact of this content on the customer journey.

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