
THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON TOURISM MARKETING

*Ruxandra Bărbuc (Popescu), PhD Student,
Valahia University, Romanian
Email: ruxandrapopescu@yahoo.com*

*Sebastian Gabor, PhD Student,
Valahia University, Romanian
Email: sebastiangabor@gmail.com*

*Florin Dimitrescu, PhD Student,
Valahia University, Romanian
Email: florindimitrescu@yahoo.com*

*Cristian Daniel Pop, PhD Student,
Valahia University, Romanian
Email: cristianpop@yahoo.com*

*Marian Catalin Burcescu, PhD Student,
Valahia University, Romanian
Email: mariancatalinburcescu@yahoo.com*

*George Alexandru Ivan, PhD Student,
Valahia University, Romanian
Email: georgealexandruivan@yahoo.com*

Abstract: In addition to the technical requirements of Web 2.0, there is also a social change and virtualization of social networks with much deeper consequences. The importance of social media and its far-reaching effects on tourism are becoming increasingly clear, so the need to address the topic of social media in tourism can no longer be dismissed out of hand. Experts are already talking about the development of the Internet, where the dichotomy between virtual and physical space dissolves. As a result, the Internet has had a massive impact on the real world and, as a result, on the practice of tourism. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the theme of the social web and tourism, which is currently a discussion that remains limited to a manageable community. The results showed how user ratings are used in the Romanian tourism market. They also showed that mapping the customer journey with the help of social networks can reveal a lot of ways for the company to improve its communication with different target groups along the customer journey.

Key words: social media, travel portal, Web 2.0, travel decision

JEL Classification: D83, M15, Z32.

1. Introduction

Marketing's main objectives when accompanying the tourist journey are to reach potential customers at every stage of their decision-making process and provide them with content and information relevant to their target group and current decision-making point while supporting branding (Hays, Page & Buhalis, 2013). Social media provides a variety of key metrics for measuring and controlling the achievement of these goals (Lang-Faria & Elliot, 2012). However, the most well-known and mostly very prominent key figures are only meaningful in very rare cases, for example, likes or followers. Even if they are available and purported to measure success, they must be completed and benchmarked before they can indicate communication successes or the need for action.

On top of that, new business models, structures, and hierarchies in tourism companies and organizations are signs and consequences of this change (Liasidou, 2022). Influence on the media landscape, media consumption, and the construction of the tourist imagination will change the tourism landscape in the long term. This contribution takes up the central points of departure of the discussion and visualizes the challenges for tourism, which are associated with social network developments, from a scientific and practical point of view.

On the other hand, the company's success in social media communication can also influence important success factors in relation to brand awareness in other communication media (Yan, WuWang, Wu, Chen & Wei, 2016). If possible, search engine rankings for important search queries and the number of new backlinks should also be considered. Possible control system for each individual customer. The so-called lead scoring procedure records the progress of individual leads through their decision-making process. Some social platforms offer specific tools for this purpose that allow the collection of contact data in social networks (lead generation forms).

The goal of those responsible for communication is to lead the tourist to a sustainable online engagement with the brand and, if necessary, transparently support him with his concerns about the tourist product (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Social sharing sites, rating and recommendation platforms, bonus programs, or campaigns to publish tourist experiences, for example in the form of photo contests or surveys, are of particular importance for this phase of the customer journey.

The present study reinforces the idea that the appropriation of tourist spaces with the help of social networks and the resulting tourist practices are unexplored so far. Another aspect that receives too little attention in science is the use of these new travel environments as a decisive success factor for travel companies in the increasingly fierce competition. However, the social web is not only affecting intermediaries but also service providers as their offerings become transparent on the social web and in guest conversations.

2. Integration of Social Media Activities into the Tourism Communication Mix

For a long time, classic travel providers criticized user ratings, but rating functions are now established on almost all portals (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). User ratings, comments, and recommendations from travelers are major challenges, especially for traditional travel suppliers, hotels, and regional tourism organizations. At first glance, the credibility of tourist reviews is unbeatable, triggering high demand for rating platforms among tourists around the world. Their influence is important for every travel provider today. High or low referral rates on highly frequented review portals can now have a serious and lasting impact on bookings (Hudson & Thal, 2013).

It is understandable that consumers are increasingly using Web 2.0 platforms as a channel through which they can find like-minded individuals who can provide them with more credible information (Sigala, 2012). But most studies are now turning to a new and very big problem – the authenticity of online reviews. Thus, the power of traveler reviews unfolds only because information seekers believe that the reviewer is fair in their judgments and filters the information solely for the benefit of other travelers. Despite the obvious difficulties of authenticity, tourist reviews are used en masse to obtain an additional basis for making a decision when booking a trip. As long as there are no alternatives to manipulable hotel review platforms and the belief in authenticity has not yet been hopelessly shaken, searchers will continue to prefer these sources to the clearly interest-based information provided by travel providers.

Unfortunately, there are also means suitable for professionals to fool the technical filters (Liasidou, 2022). If the website operator finds no problems, it releases the contribution to be viewed by all portal visitors. This completes the hotel evaluation process. To enable the authentication of customer ratings, the reasons for manipulation must first be examined more closely. So credibility and authenticity are the key factors on the Internet in the long run. Not only because almost nothing remains hidden from the billion eyes of Web 2.0 users anyway, but a strategy of fairness in evaluating your own products is also recommended. The enormous importance of credibility for user trust in the travel provider can also be derived from highly successful providers in other sectors on the Internet.

Equally, there is strong competitive pressure between hotel destinations at the local level, which is further intensified by rankings on rating platforms (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). Another reason for manipulated reviews is that specialized marketing agencies make money from targeted manipulation of ratings. Therefore, they offer this service to travel companies that do not have enough free capacity to introduce fake reviews independently. However, the information phase is about weighing the arguments for a travel destination or travel offer. Users are assured in their decision by the ratings and recommendations of other travelers (offline and online) which play a major role. Moreover, the decisions based on it are not linear but are highly complex and subject to numerous heuristics and distortion effects. This means that the social web (in the form of user-generated opinions and recommendations) is also highly relevant to those target segments that obtain information on the Internet.

It should be mentioned that user-generated ratings and recommendations perform different psychological functions in the different phases of the decision-making process (Lang-Faria & Elliot, 2012). Practically, two ways of the decision can be distinguished:

- in the early stages of the decision-making process for a trip (inspiration and information), the reception of user-generated content is largely open. This means that Internet users can be influenced in both a positive and negative direction when dealing with the reviews and recommendations of other travelers. The evaluations and recommendations of other travelers are here for information.
- the more the decision-making process for a trip progresses, the more selective the reception of user-generated content will be. As a result, users no longer pay attention to the whole range of opinions and comments but to the selective search for information, and perception shapes the decision-making process.

While the open phases of the decision-making process are about inspiration and gathering information, in the later phases of the travel decision (booking, confirmation, and post-purchase phase), everything revolves around maintaining or restoring as positive a vacation as possible and, therefore, of the self-image possible (Sigala, 2012). The social network is, therefore, like any other social reality, subject to the action mechanisms of the (social) group. Conversely, a very positive review can compensate for a negative one if you identify more strongly with the sender of the positive review than with the negative one. This fact also justifies the formation of real average values of user ratings.

From the analysis of the specialized literature, it can be seen that there is only one relevant success factor in the social web: credibility (Yan, WuWang, Wu, Chen & Wei, 2016). Credibility is especially important in a project like travel because you have to rely on other people's judgments or experiences in advance. From the user's point of view, the final decision on whether user-generated ratings and recommendations are reliable or not comes down to five factors (Liasidou, 2022):

- independence: users assume that the recommendations of other travelers on the Internet are not manipulated by commercial providers and that the sender of a review does not pursue any commercial interest. Therefore, even small signs of manipulation can cause great damage because they are often discovered and generate resistance.
- authenticity: although personal contact in a travel agency is still highly valued by many, users of subjective evaluations and recommendations on the Internet assume that the person making their experiences accessible to the general public has actually spent their vacation in the said place and, therefore, was able to make a realistic judgment.
- timeliness: user-generated content is not only subject to constant expansion, but also to verification by other users; therefore, it can hardly be surpassed in terms of timeliness, which is what makes it so valuable, especially compared to travel guides or printed catalogs.

- security: on the websites of commercial tourism providers, in particular, it can be seen that the need for security through recommendations from other travelers is offset by skepticism about the source of testimonials. The reasons for this conflict are not only the expected manipulation attempts on the part of the supplier but often the lack of basic information about the sender.
- diversity: in addition to the quality of reviews and recommendations, the quantity of contributions also matters. The social web contains a wealth of opinions, ratings, comments, and networking knowledge. This abundance is especially helpful in the travel industry because it gives a full and balanced picture of the travel destination.

These credibility criteria serve an important function in the decision-making process for a trip. They help to satisfy the need for security and reduce decision and booking risk on the part of travelers. For the supplier, on the other hand, these are guidelines that must be followed during implementation so that credibility can be conveyed and customer buy-in can be generated. If a critical mass of customers loses trust in user reviews due to the lack of mechanisms to avoid manipulation and counterfeiting, Web 2.0 and with it, tourists would quickly lose their power (Sigala, 2012). While this would certainly make some providers happy the expected uncertainty and loss of user sovereignty gained through Web 2.0 would ultimately harm the entire industry. If bad or manipulated reviews about their own products appear on the Internet, or if the brand is attacked through communities and blogs, the company must be immediately informed about it, and secondly, react immediately.

3. Conclusion

The ride is usually a complex decision-making process where many different facets of performance are weighted and factored into an overall rating. Rarely, however, does the tourist decide on a trip by evaluating it explicitly, i.e. by making a partial evaluation for each evaluation object (hotel, country, service, price, etc.). Travel decisions are often implicitly made by making a holistic, intuitive assessment in which the various assessments of individual aspects are cognitively integrated. As a rule, certain threshold values must be reached for the evaluation of the central performance dimensions, that is, the decision tends to be non-compensatory. The more transparent the rating system is, the easier it is for the user to make a decision. More and more travellers use the social web actively and passively, based on the recommendations of other travel independent communities or rating portals. In order to successfully implement the recommendation and evaluation procedures on the websites of commercial providers and tourism organizations, it is important to take the scepticism of users seriously and take appropriate measures to support the credibility of the content. In addition to sender transparency, rating and ranking, it also includes allowing critical voices.

The more effort a user has already put into searching through social networks for a destination or travel offer, the more likely they are to look for confirming reviews and recommendations and to hide the negative ones. Conversely, decisions against a travel destination can also be positively reinforced by the presence of individual critical reviews. Dissonance effects, or selective search and information strategies that serve to resolve cognitive dissonance, can occur both in the reservation phase itself and in the post-purchase phase to reduce dissonance.

Reports from travellers give companies the opportunity to respond to criticism (complaint management), improve inadequate offers and eliminate dissatisfaction (quality management), to put customer contact on a solid long-term basis (active reputation management). Through the social web, the supplier also builds extensive customer knowledge, from which important information about the quality of its own travel offers can be found. Finally, however, there are also opportunities for service providers (e.g. hotels) themselves, as the social web gives them direct access to customers who are actively collecting information. The increasing proximity of service providers to users not only changes the role of intermediaries but will also allow a greater variety of tourism products and a stronger focus on increasingly differentiated requirements.

In the future, it will be more and more about how users can exchange information on platforms with each other, but also with the travel provider. Travel suppliers or travel agents should not only see themselves as sellers of a product but also as knowledge carriers who exchange experiences with their customers and provide experiences for individual needs.

References

- Buhalis, D., & Law, R. (2008). Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20 years on and 10 years after the Internet—The state of eTourism research. *Tourism Management*, 29(4), 609-623.
- Chatzigeorgiou, C. (2017). Modelling the impact of social media influencers on behavioural intentions of millennials: The case of tourism in rural areas in Greece. *Journal of Tourism, Heritage & Services Marketing*, 3(2), 25-29.
- Hays, S., Page, S. J., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media as a destination marketing tool: its use by national tourism organizations. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 211-237.
- Hudson, S., & Thal, K. (2013). The impact of social media on the consumer decision process: Implications for tourism marketing. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(1-2), 156-160.
- Lang-Faria, W., & Elliot, S. (2012). Understanding the role of social media in destination marketing. *Tourism*, 7(1), 193-211.
- Liasidou, S. (2022) Reviewing the Content of European Countries' Official Tourism Websites: A Neo/Post-Fordist Perspective. *Tourism and Hospitality*, 3, 380-398.

Sigala, M. (2012). The Integration and Impact of Web 2.0 on Business Operations and Strategies. In: M. Sigala, E. Christou, & U. Gretzel, *Social media in Travel, Tourism, and Hospitality* (pp. 7-10). Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Yan, Q., Wu, S., Wang, L., Wu, P., Chen, H., & Wei, G. (2016). E-WOM from e-commerce websites and social media: Which will consumers adopt? *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 17(5), 62-73.