

Social Media as a Channel of Constructive Dialogue for Tourism Businesses

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INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are having a major impact on tourism in general. Ongoing developments in ICTs have significant changes in the way tourism-related information is distributed and on consumer behavior. The major impacts of the “digital revolution” on tourism have come through Social Media (SM) and mobile devices. According to the latest estimations the worldwide audience of SM has surpassed two billion users in 2015 (eMarketer, 2015). SM allow tourists to interact and share their views and experiences with potentially unrestricted virtual communities (Gretzel & Yoo, 2013; Leung et al., 2013; Sigala et al., 2012). This approach to meeting and communicating with people globally has revolutionized communications and consequently the marketing of tourism businesses (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

SM or Web 2.0 platforms include social networks (e.g. Facebook), blogs (e.g. Blogger), microblogs (e.g. Twitter), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), content sharing platforms (e.g. AssociateContent.com) and text/audio/video sharing platforms (e.g. Flickr and YouTube). SM are presenting a host of new challenges as well as opportunities for tourism providers. One of their main functions is to establish an interactive channel of communication, which is mutually beneficial to both parties involved: it offers a medium for tourists to express their requirements, and gives tourism providers a tool to acquire customer feedback (Bilgihan et al., 2016). Whilst this represents a real challenge for tourism businesses, it also opens new channels of communication. It is therefore

imperative for tourism businesses to consider how SM is shaping business-to-consumer marketing communications and how may exploit their full potential (Benckendorff et al., 2014; Law et al., 2014; Sotiriadis & Van Zyl, 2013).

Within this context, the present article takes a marketing perspective to analyze the potential contribution of SM. The main aim is to examine and suggest the ways in which tourism businesses could take advantage of SM as a channel of constructive dialogue with customers. In sum, the paper suggests ways to take full advantage of SM in order to enhance listening to, and understanding of, their current and potential customers.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet has become the first-choice place for consumers to search for information on tourism destinations, as well as being the most important venue for marketing of tourism services (Benckendorff et al., 2014; Gretzel & Yoo, 2013; Law et al., 2014). The challenges and opportunities for tourism-related industries that arise from the digital environment are obvious in everyday business practice (Leung et al., 2013; Sigala et al., 2012).

During the last two decades scholars have shown an increasing interest in the growing role of SM in the tourism field (Law et al., 2014; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The dominant topic investigated is the effectiveness of different digital marketing strategies and tools including SM (Law et al., 2014). The reason for this is that SM play a significant role in many aspects of tourism, especially

in decision-making behavior, tourism promotion and interaction with consumers (Bilgihan et al., 2016; Gretzel & Yoo, 2013; Law et al., 2014; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

User-generated content (UGC) is one of the main activities of tourists on SM. They share their experiences, views and evaluations through online reviews. Examples of this behavior include posts, wikis, discussion forums, chats, tweets, podcasting, pins, and sharing of digital images, video and audio files (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). The issue of implications of UGC has been examined by Ayeh et al. (2013), Boley et al. (2013), Wilson et al. (2012), Xiang and Gretzel (2010), and Ye et al. (2011). The topic of factors motivating tourists' involvement in SM was examined by Bronner and de Hoog (2011), and Munar and Jacobsen (2014). The study by Bilgihan et al (2016) explored the factors motivating consumers to share tourism information via SM. The study results show that the main factors of intention to share knowledge are belief in integrity and perceived ease of use. The issue of influence of SM on tourist behavior was examined by Parra-López et al. (2011) and Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (2013).

The present study is focusing on the impact of SM in the field of tourism business marketing and management. As argued by scholars, the changes of tourist behavior influence the approaches and tools that tourism businesses have to adopt and use in managing and marketing their offerings in the digital environment (Leung et al., 2013; Sigala, 2012; Sigala et al., 2012). Kim et al. (2015) suggested that online reviews in SM should be managed as a critical part of hotel marketing. Furthermore, tourism businesses make use of SM for various purposes, such as engagement, commitment, relationship building, and managing their reputation and brand (Dijkmans et al., 2015). The reason for the success of SM in business originates from the possibility to manage relationships with customers in a customized way (Calefato et al., 2015).

Literature also suggested that SM are an effective marketing channel that can be wisely used in integrated marketing communications of tourism services (see, for instance, Oz, 2015; Sotiriadis & Van Zyl, 2013). Additionally, SM can be used by tourism businesses to support and enhance knowledge management (KM) activities, as suggested by Sigala (2011), and Sigala and Chalkiti (2014). The mass collaboration and communication functionalities of the SM can support and enhance conversational, participatory and collaborative KM processes; i.e. searching, sharing and creating information and intelligence. Examples of internal KM processes include searching, storing and collecting information, and practices of organisational learning and internal social bonding. External KM processes include sharing, discussing and creating knowledge with others (Sigala & Chalkiti, 2014). Finally, the study by Xiang et al. (2015) pointed out the tremendous growth of SM and UGC on the Internet and demonstrated the utility of big data analytics to better understand important hospitality business issues.

The above literature review indicates that the field of SM is a challenging topic. As can be seen, the crucial issues are to adopt the appropriate approach and to use SM in the field of tourism efficiently in order to exploit the full potential of this social phenomenon. Savvy tourists are now 'unbundling' the whole planning, booking and sharing of their experiences (Morrison, 2013). SM are one of the tools at their disposal and they are taking full advantage of it.

The interaction of the main challenges in the tourism market with the digital environment and the impressive adoption and use of SM clearly indicates that tourism providers need to adopt new approaches in the field of communications, such as developing a multi-channel approach to communications, embracing the influence of SM, and engaging customers in a mutually beneficial dialogue. This article argues that SM could have a stronger contribution in the fields of service experience improvement and innovation in tourism.

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