

## Chapter 16

# Social Media Impact on Holiday Travel Planning: The Case of the Russian and the FSU Markets

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The impact of social media on the travel industry is predicted to be tremendous, especially on its holiday travel segment. Although there is a plethora of studies concentrating on the role and impact of social media in travel related decisions, most of them are medium and community specific, or focus on a specific stage of the decision making or the travel planning process. This paper presents a comprehensive view of the role and impact of social media on the travel planning process: before, during and after the trip, providing insights on usage levels, scope of use, level of influence, and trust. The study was conducted through an online structured questionnaire on a sample of 346 members of an online panel of internet users from Russia and the other Former Soviet Union (FSU) Republics who had been on holidays in the previous 12 months. Findings reveal that social media are predominantly used after holidays for experience sharing. It is also shown that there is a strong correlation between level of influence from social media and changes made to holiday plans. Moreover, it is revealed that user-generated content is more trusted than official tourism websites, travel agents, and mass media advertising.*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1861-9.ch016

## INTRODUCTION

During the last years social media have been enjoying a phenomenal success: Facebook, a social networking website, claims that its active users reached more than 500 million worldwide, 50% of which log in every day (Facebook, 2010); Twitter, a micro-blogging website hosts 175 million users who post 95 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2010); YouTube exceeds 200 million views on a daily basis from mobile devices only (YouTube, 2011); and at the same time it is estimated that there are over 150 million blogs worldwide (BlogPulse, <http://www.blogpulse.com>). With a participation of such a volume, social media constitute significant networks of consumer knowledge that influence consumer behaviour (De Valck, Van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009), and “further complicate the time-honoured textbook buying behaviour process described in the Inputs-Processing-Response model” (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008, p. 239). Moreover, social media start replacing commercial sources of information and evidence limited replacement of reference groups (Jepsen, 2006).

As it is the case with the majority of the key economic sectors and industries, tourism is also affected by the existence and increasing use of social media as they “are taking an important role in travellers’ information search and decision-making behaviours” (Yoo, Gretzel, & Zach 2011, p. 526). The importance of the tourism industry, and in particular its holiday segment is well documented: With export earnings in the area of US\$ 852 billion in 2009, tourism is among the world’s fastest growing economic sectors, with a volume that can easily be compared with that of oil, food products, or automobiles (UNWTO, 2011a). Among the three purpose of travel segments (as defined by UNWTO: “Leisure, recreation and holidays”, “Visiting friends & relatives, health, religion & other”, and “Business”), leisure, recreation and holidays is not only the dominant

one, accounting for 51% of all international tourist arrivals in 2009 (UNWTO, 2010), but also it is the one less affected by the recent financial and economic crisis. Although the overall number of holiday trips taken in Europe in 2009 declined by 5% compared to that of 2008, this decrease was less significant to those of the other segments: Trips for visiting friends & relatives declined by 10%, and business trips declined by 8% (IPK, 2010).

Consumer behaviour in tourism has always been influenced by advancements in Information Communication Technologies (Buhalis, 1998; Poon, 1993). As in other industries, also in tourism, Web 2.0 has changed significantly the way individuals plan and consume travel (Buhalis & Law, 2008). As per the case of social media, their impacts on the travel industry are predicted to be tremendous (Gretzel, Kang, & Lee, 2008). In support of such arguments: (a) The European Travel Monitor suggests that six out of ten Europeans who went on a holiday trip during 2009 used the internet: 48% as bookers (+11% compared to 2008) and 12% as “lookers” seeking travel options online but not booking (IPK, 2010); (b) TripAdvisor, a travel review website, serves more than 40 million users per month who seek advice about their travel plans and hosts more than 40 million travel reviews and opinions (TripAdvisor, 2010); and (c) eMarketer (2008) found that 82% of US online consumers have checked online reviews, blogs and other online feedback for their travel related purchasing decisions.

As per the context of this research, the case of the Russian Federation and its surrounding Former Soviet Union (FSU) Republics, present an interesting challenge both to academia and tourism marketers: Although in 2009 international tourism suffered from the recent financial and economic crisis, evidencing a 4.2% decrease in international tourist arrivals, and a 5.7% decrease in tourism expenditures compared to 2008 (UNWTO, 2010b), the emerging economies such as Brazil (2009-2010 change in tourism expenditure:

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