

Chapter 51

Digital Divide and Disadvantaged Populations in E-Tourism

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ABSTRACT

The tourism sector has changed rapidly since the dawn of the internet revolution in the late 1990s. At the same time, the digital divide has disadvantaged many in developing economies as well as the disabled population. It is interesting to observe, however, that the emerging computer technologies, especially mobile computing, are offering significant opportunities to this disadvantaged population. This chapter discusses these opportunities that increase the participation in and reaping of benefits from tourism.

INTRODUCTION TO E-TOURISM

Compared to previous years, the current political and economic situation in the world has changed tourists' habits considerably. After the late 1990's, the progression and exploration of the internet has offered tourists a valuable virtual friend which has enabled them to receive more information regarding availability of services and prices that meet their individual needs (a detailed research

in www.go-online.gr (2010)). The obvious difference from the pre-internet age is that the consumer now has direct contact with the tourist product producer and less intermediaries exist (Walle, 1996). Therefore the initial cost of travel goes down and the consumer has more choices available to her, being able to customize the whole travel experience (Livi, 2008).

Internet penetration differs from country to country and it depends on various social and political factors which impact on the citizen's access and effective use of technology with increased

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expected benefits to society (Xiaoming & Chow, 2004). The development of new technologies is growing at a faster rate than in the past and therefore traditional travel agencies must realize the importance of this change and adjust their philosophy accordingly to meet the needs of the new smart consumer who uses efficient technology (Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999).

The digital customer is more demanding now due to the fact that the customer is able to gather a greater amount of information which includes product availability in less time with the help of the internet. So she¹ is able to adjust her consumer buying behavior through the power of information she now owns. The comparison of prices, the customized holidays, the research through tourist travel agencies, online bids for holiday packages and information on people's travel experiences through blogs and social networking are a few of the important tools that the customer owns and uses to change (though often unconsciously) the way that the competition now operates.

The latest technologies have greatly influenced the nature of E-Tourism (Buhalis, 2003). Broadband internet connections with fast speeds have impacted the power of information which the customer finds available. The power of information depends on the quality and the quantity and these values increase as the speed of the transferred internet data increases. Moreover users are now having access in streaming sound and video which significantly affect the buying decision (Langer, 2002).

Other technologies which have helped E-Tourism progress are the wireless connections and the Wi-Fi networks. The wireless networks have helped the implementation of communication between customers and companies in any place around the world without any limitations. Wi-Fi has been very popular due to the introduction of mobile computing as a solution to use your computer facilities anytime and anywhere (Reza, 2005).

The three elements of mobile computing are ("Mobile Computing", 2010):

- Communication: Access of a network or other communication partners without a wire because it is replaced by electromagnetic waves (Schiller, 2003).
- Devices: The variety of mobile devices that exist and have access in wireless networks.
- Applications: Applications that run partially or completely on mobile devices (Amjad, 2004).

The mobile nature of computer science has been very useful for human mobility (Kim, 2001) especially when people move from one place to the other for tourism. As the years go by and public network technologies progress at a faster rate, there is an increased quantity of information exchanged between people.

DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS DEFINITION

The term, 'disadvantaged populations', describes the groups of people that have been denied access to the tools needed for self sufficiency. The topics that feature here are autonomy, incentive, responsibility, self respect, health, education, information, employment, capital and much more (Mayer, 2003). Self sufficiency describes the state that the human survival depends only on personal soft or hard skills and not on external factors such as support or other kinds of help. The prevention from the self sufficiency goal is usually caused by the lack of availability or low access to specific resources. The resources needed from the disadvantaged population in order to adopt self sufficiency are (Mayer, 2003):

1. Autonomy or non-dependence: Autonomy is described as the opportunity of a social group to act according to their will and be

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