



Social Media Marketing for Destination Promotion

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Abstract

A one-way conversation with consumers in destination branding was pervasive when destination-marketing organizations created and generated their destination brands. However, social media has made a two-way conversation possible with consumers participating in the development of a destination brand identity/image. Travel research constantly shows the high influential role of word-of-mouth (WOM) information in travelers' decision-making process. In recent studies its electronic version, the WOM presented in social media sites became the focus of these discussions. This study took one step further, by examining travelers' social media usage from another angle, with the aim to suggest potential ways for destination marketers to exploit the beneficial feature of social media in their promotional activities. The study examined the usage of social media in a specific context, regarding travelers' social media usage in general and concerning their recent trip to J&K. A quantitative (n=84) survey was conducted in order to obtain a thorough picture of the social media usage. Traveler' social media usage was identified through a five steps travel planning framework, while analyzing possible variables that influence its usage. Moreover, it was assumed that younger Travelers would use social media differently, thus requiring a different approach from the DMOs when applying social media in their promotion. The results indicated, in consistence with previous studies, that social media is considered as a really important information source during travel planning due to its particular qualities such as informativity and credibility, however, it is mainly used in the information search phase. Though it was pre-assumed, the results showed no correlation between age, and the act or the extent of social media usage in travel planning. The main influencing factor was found to be the purpose of the trip. However, age plays a role in the way of social media considered to be important and used, where the personal recommendations and the audio-visual

features were favored. The findings were converted into suggestions for the HNTO; however, further research is required to clearly identify the exact marketing and promotional tools. Nonetheless, the study represents a new perspective on comprehensive studies of social media usage in tourism context and hopefully contributes to a greater understanding of the possibilities of using social media in tourism destination promotion.

Introduction

There has been a fundamental change in the way we use the Internet and social media in order to gather tourism-related information as a part of our travel experience (Buhalis & Law, 2011). We are constantly online; almost everywhere we go, we are available on different social media like Facebook and Twitter and we are progressively becoming more addicted. Consumers today are not just passive receivers of a message, but rather active participants in both the creation of a destination's brand and in communication through discussion, recommendations and sharing (Sandström, 2014). Traditionally, destination branding has been conducted by destination management organizations (DMOs) (Blain et al., 2005). However, the development of information sharing online and the evolution of an interactive Internet has forced the DMOs to be more aware of the many things that are happening on the social media and thus to be more present online. This increases the necessity for the

companies and DMOs not only to be online but also progressively to be online in the right way (Smith et al., 2010:4). There are still discussions about how organizations exploit the opportunities available online in the best possible way, on social media in particular. Mostly, there is a desire to understand how social media can be utilized in branding. This change is seen in the light of the technological development that occurred with the transition from Web 1.0 to a more user-based and participatory Web 2.0. This technological upgrade can be seen as the platform for the evolution of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:61), which has enabled user-generated content (UGC) to gain ground (Munar, 2010). UGC refers to the opportunity for consumers to share their experiences and information with other consumers online; for example, tourists share their holiday pictures on Facebook and publish their reviews on TripAdvisor. The creation and exchange of UGC has become a powerful source of communication and has challenged the traditional branding methods.

Consumers are given a new form of “power” because they are able to influence other users' expectations and attitudes by sharing experiences and reviews through social media (Lim et al., 2012). Social media sites can be used for many purposes but according to Xiang and Gretzel (2010), “social media sites are substantially directed to those who look for travel information through search engines” (Lim et al., 2012:198). Social media have become one of the most used online travel information sources (O'Connor, 2008; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), resulting in an increased interest from tourism researchers.

Within the tourism industry, researchers particularly show an interest in UGC on social media. The interactivity allowed by social media causes DMOs to be in direct competition with the content created by users, removing their monopoly on the provision of destination-related information. The industry has become aware that the increased online activity has an impact on how destinations are perceived and the importance of having a proper online branding strategy. Although the emergence of social media and the expansion of Web 2.0 have received a large amount of attention, little research has been conducted on the impact of these phenomena on

destination branding and destination brand equity (Munar, 2011). Through the examination of how social media influence consumers' travel decisions, and thus how social media impact and alter the branding efforts of DMOs, this study addresses the field of study in an innovative way, striving to contribute with new insights on consumers' use of social media, the implications of social media for DMOs and their impact on destination promotion. Additionally, social media contain a wide array of opportunities, present a new way for DMOs to brand their destination and are an innovative way of addressing the traditional construct of branding, for which reason innovation can be argued to be the overarching topic of this study. This study therefore aims to apply an innovative approach to destination promotion, looking to expand existing knowledge on destination branding and brand equity, tourism behavior in relation to social media and user generated content.

Review of Literature

This section seeks to outline the empirical subject fields, social media and destination branding, with the aim of providing the theoretical foundation for this study. Initially, the concept of social

Media will be reviewed with regards to the development of the concept and the implications it brings.

Social Media

Social media, as we know it today, are an American inspired phenomenon, which commenced in

2004 with the establishment of the most popular social medium of today, Facebook.

Today, social media have become an integrated part of our society. According to statistics from 2012 there are more than 1 billion users on Facebook, which makes it the largest social network in the world (Midtjysk Turisme, 2013). Even though the concept of social media is not a new occurrence there still seems to exist different opinions about what should be included under this term. Social media is a tool that enables the users to communicate with each other online as well as to share knowledge, information, ideas, opinions and insight. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as media “that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (. Another way to describe social media is that it is a medium that moves away from the one-to-many model towards a many-to-many model (Poynter, 2010). Considering these two different models in a historical perspective, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)

describe how companies were able to control the information that was available online, resulting in closely monitored and controlled communication with consumers. Today, it is much more difficult for companies to control the information and tourism organizations are now confronted with the challenge of communicating with customers amidst media influence they have little or no control over (Munar, Gyimothy & Cai, in Munar et al., 2013). In this terminology, social media have transformed the information landscape, converting the Internet from its traditional role as a broadcasting medium towards a new role as a “participatory platform, which allows people to become the “media” themselves for collaborating and sharing information” (Leung et al., 2013). Lim et al. (2012) note how consumers can use, and misuse, company information through social media “by either posting comments, opinions, or sharing information with peers” (p. 199), but also emphasize that as a result of these user activities, organizations can optimize their marketing efforts through social media as it becomes easier to reach a larger group at a very low cost (Lim et al., 2012). Leung et al. (2013) also identify the ability to “understand and respond to consumer preferences” through

online communities as a valuable function of social media. Thus, social media as a marketing tool has become a very important way for companies to get in contact with potential customers in that social media equally allow for marketers to exploit word-of-mouth marketing (Kozinets et al, 2010). Word-of-mouth on social media is a powerful force for destinations gives consumers the opportunity to disseminate their opinion on a product, or in this case a destination, to a large group of people, but also for companies to engage in more direct contact with consumers and vice versa (Lim et al., 2012). Seen from a consumer perspective, word-of-mouth possesses the strength that it is a form of exchange of information between consumers “in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence” (Litvin et al., 2008:459). Instead, word-of-mouth is considered to exercise an interpersonal influence, as opposed to commercial, by virtue of its high-perceived trustworthiness, which especially in the tourism industry is recognized as an important influence; word-of-mouth acts as a risk-reducing mechanism for tourism products, which are generally perceived to be “high-priced, high involvement and well-differentiated in nature” (Leung et al., 2013:8). Furthermore,

word-of-mouth can create “diffusion and marketing momentum for new destinations and innovative travel products” (Litvin et al., 2008:461). Word-of-mouth also holds a large amount of power over a destination’s image in that visitors can easily communicate their experience, negative or positive, which then leads to an increase in the expectations of future consumers (Litvin et al., 2008). In an industry characterized by a large degree of product intangibility and a decision-making process in which the emotional risk is high due to the impossibility of evaluating products prior to consumption, interpersonal influence, and thus word-of-mouth, inevitably comes to play a decisive role. In this relation, social media allows for an easier and faster way to disseminate this important interpersonal influence, which is then characterized as electronic word-of-mouth (Litvin et al., 2008:461).

Destination Promotion and Destination Branding

Keller (2003) argues, “tourist destinations, like products and services, can be branded to create a favorable image so as to entice visitors” (in Poria et al., 2011). Branding within tourism has become an increasingly important discipline in destination management as destinations face fierce

competition, substitutability and lack of differentiation as a result of globalization and the consequent broadening of the tourism market (Morgan et al., 2003; Pike, 2005). Tourism products are considered to be more complex and demand higher involvement from the part of consumers than traditional consumer goods do and thus, the branding of destinations is correspondingly a more demanding discipline than traditional branding (Bowen & Clarke, 2009). Also, adding to the complexity of destination branding, “the creation of a destination brand has to address multiple groups of stakeholders, socio-cultural identities and take into consideration the intangibility and multifaceted features of a destination” (Munar, 2011). Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) quite precisely capture the essence of destination branding, stating, “places are just too complex to be treated like products” (p. 510). However, despite this mutual agreement, there generally seems to be a lack of clarity and consistency in the definition of destination branding, the elements constituting it as well as recommended measurement methods (Blain et al., 2005; Pike, 2005, 2009; Boo et al., 2009; Garcia et al., 2012). As stated by Anholt (cited in Pike, 2009), “nobody agrees

on what, exactly, branding means” Nevertheless, a number of researchers have reached agreement in one essential: the concept of “experience” is a crucial determinant within destination branding (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998; Blain et al., 2005; Ritchie & Crouch, 2005). The importance of the concept is illustrated in the purchasing behavior of tourism consumers. Consumers are concerned with the overall user experience of a tourism product and the many factors influencing it, rather than solely the quality of a particular product and “the entire visitor experience is what is effectively being bought” (Blain et al., 2005:329). Consequently, researchers stress the importance of incorporating the concept of the visitor experience into the destination branding process and with a view to Aaker’s (1991) definition of the brand, as presented in Section 3.4., Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) define a destination brand as follows: “A destination brand is a name, symbol, logo, trademark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; furthermore, it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination. It also serves to consolidate and reinforce the post-travel recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience.”

Morgan and Pritchard (2004) similarly recognize experience as a determinant in destination branding: “Branding is perhaps the most powerful marketing weapon available to contemporary destination marketers confronted by tourists who are increasingly seeking lifestyle fulfillment and experience rather than recognizing differentiation in the more tangible elements of the destination product such as accommodation and attractions.”

Research Methodology

Research Objectives

RQ1: To study Influential factors on the usage of different information sources

RQ2: To understand the role of social media in the travelers’ travel planning process

RQ 3: To find out how do travelers perceive the content presented in social media sites

By illuminating these research questions the potentials and possibilities of social media usage in tourism destination promotion, in this case for the HNTO, will be pointed out. The aim of this paper is to understand fully the phenomenon of how people use social media in their travel planning, and how the official tourism promotion could apply social media in their promotional activities, in accordance with travelers’ travel information search process. Thus, a cross-

sectional quantitative method was chosen and a survey was conducted to research travelers’ information search regarding travel planning and the role of social media in this process. However, to reflect deeper on the role of social media for the individual travelers,

Data Collection

The data collection took place at the Sri Nagar Airport during the months of June 2015 by distributing surveys among the travelers who came to visit Kashmir valley. The aim to select travelers flying valley as the base for the quantitative data collection was that valley is considered as a prominent destination in J&K. Moreover, from a practical perspective by conducting the questionnaires among the flying travelers one can have access to a large amount of data. Due to the airport’s security restrictions, the survey could only be conducted among the checked-in travelers, who were still on ground, which resulted in a short timeframe for conducting the survey.

Sampling

The questionnaires of this project were sampled based on some predetermined types of probabilities that gave way to approach the aimed group of audience, which in this case were mainly the younger age groups of travelers (20-59 years) who travel to J&K.

Though, as it was argued the age of the respondents should not be seen as a strict requirement when selecting the sample, as the behavior patterns using social media will give the base for the analysis. The targeted respondents were selected in no particular numerical order, but mainly randomly pointed out among the travelers. The sample size of the survey was not predetermined. However, during the five data collection occasions 88 questionnaires were collected. 4 questionnaires were incomplete so were rejected. Hence all together 84 questionnaires were selected for the analysis, where the empirical data obtained through the questionnaires was examined based on statistical calculations using the SPSS program.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire was designed in a way to *shed light on the research questions:*

Due to the first research question, questions regarding the frequency of usage of the various information sources (q1) or social media sites (q2) and concerning the usage of social media in the different travel planning phases (q3) were integrated in the questionnaire. Regarding the second research question, the perceived content of social media, a close-ended question was

proposed (q4). Moreover, due to the study's focus, to identify the potentials of social media in destination promotion, study specific questions, regarding the usefulness of different information sources during travel planning to J&K(q5), the different social media sites' usage during the travel planning phases (q6) and an open question requiring evaluation of the content posted on social media sites about J&K particularly valley (q7) were proposed

Data Analysis

Respondent profile

The profile of the 84 survey respondents will be presented here with more detail. While grouping the respondents regarding their age the four age-groups were applied thus, the age groups of 16-19 years, 20-39 years, 40-59 years and 60-74 years. However, the age of the 84 respondents was ranging from 20 years till 59 years, therefore, only the age groups of 20-39 years and 40-59 years were further in use. The largest age group was comprised of those who are between 20 and 39 years old with 65.5%, while the age group of 40-59 years were representing the remaining 34.5% .The average age of the respondents was 37-38 years.

Table1: Respondents Age Distribution

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	20-39 years	55	65,5	65,5	65,5
	40-59 years	29	34,5	34,5	100,0
	Total	84	100,0	100,0	

Table 2 : Respondents Age Distribution

		Gender			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	34	40,5	40,5	40,5
	Female	50	59,5	59,5	100,0
	Total	84	100,0	100,0	

Regarding the respondents’ gender, more females than males completed the survey. Most respondents (89.3 %) reported being married or being in a relationship, and the majority (65.4 %) reported having one or more children. In relation to the educational level of the respondents, 89.5 % claimed to have a completed higher education, where 60.7 % of the respondents reported to have tertiary education. Furthermore, 8.3 % of all respondents stated to be a student.

RQ1 :Influential factors on the usage of different information sources

This section will try to answer the first research objective twwhether due to the different tourist characteristics, such as age,

gender or due to the trip characteristics, the purpose of the trip any variation can be seen in the Travelers’ use of the different information sources, where the discussion will focus on the different social media sites.

1. Age

In order to clearly point out any relationship between age as an influencing variable and the different social media sites a correlation test should be run. In table : 3 the Pearson correlation test showed an inverse linear correlation (-0,121) between age and the usage of travel reviews for a different extent (most used-least used) during travel planning, meaning that as the age is getting

higher the usage of the reviews is becoming lower. However, as seen from the p-value (0,273) the correlation between age and usage of travel reviews is not significant.

Table 3: Correlation between Age and Usage of Travel reviews

		Age	Independent travel reviews
Age	Pearson Correlation	1	-,121
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,273
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	5667,810	-153,952
	Covariance	68,287	-1,855
	N	84	84
Independent travel reviews	Pearson Correlation	-,121	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,273	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	-153,952	285,238
	Covariance	-1,855	3,437
	N	84	84

Furthermore, the table: 4 shows correlation between the usage of social networking sites and age showed similar results, with a negative Pearson correlation (-0,143) and with a significance level of 0,194 Therefore, it has to be argued that the age cannot be claimed to be a significant variable on the Travelers’ social media usage during travel

planning, Regarding the trip to J&K, the clear difference between the different age groups’ usage of social media can be seen in the case of the independent travel reviews ,where 47 % of the younger age group while only 17 % of the older age group claimed the independent travel reviews to be useful.

Table 4: Correlation between Age and Usage of Social networking Sites

		Correlations	
		Age	Social networking sites
Age	Pearson Correlation	1	-,143
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,194
	N	84	84
Social networking sites	Pearson Correlation	-,143	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,194	
	N	84	84

However, to see whether age plays a significant role as a variable in reporting the different social media sites useful, a correlation test should be run. The below

Chi-Square test pointed out a clear significant relationship between the age group and travel review usage (p= 0,007).

Table 5 : Correlation between by age groups and travel reviews usage regarding the trip to J&K

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7,354 ^a	1	,007		
Continuity Correction ^b	6,121	1	,013		
Likelihood Ratio	7,874	1	,005		
Fisher's Exact Test				,009	,006
Linear-by-Linear Association	7,267	1	,007		
N of Valid Cases	84				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 10,70.

In addition, a much less relationship was observed between age groups and social networking sites' usage for traveling to J&K

($\chi^2=2,540$; p=0,111) where the correlation cannot be considered significant . It was noted above that the age does not play an

influential role in the use of social media sites regarding the travel planning in general

Table 6: Correlation between Age Group, Social Networking Site Usage concerning trip to J&K

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2,540 ^a	1	,111		
Continuity Correction ^b	1,630	1	,202		
Likelihood Ratio	2,426	1	,119		
Fisher's Exact Test				,125	,103
Linear-by-Linear Association	2,510	1	,113		
N of Valid Cases	84				

a. 1 cells (25,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4,49.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

2. Gender

By conducting a Chi-Square correlation test for both cases, for the usage of independent travel reviews ($\chi^2=2,749$; $p=0,840$) and for the social networking sites ($\chi^2=4,517$; $p=0,607$), the results confirm that the

correlation between gender and the usage of the different social media sites is insignificant (see table 7). Furthermore, concerning the trip to J&K small gender differences can be seen in the respondents' usage of the social media, and only in the usage of the travel reviews.

Table 7 : Correlation between Gender and Independent Travel Review Usage

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2,749 ^a	6	,840
Likelihood Ratio	2,758	6	,839
Linear-by-Linear Association	,022	1	,882
N of Valid Cases	84		

a. 7 cells (50,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,62.

Table 8: Correlation between Gender and Usage of Social networking Sites

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4,517 ^a	6	,607
Likelihood Ratio	4,923	6	,554
Linear-by-Linear Association	,021	1	,884
N of Valid Cases	84		

a. 11 cells (78,6%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,62.

Further, correlation test was run, where the Chi-Square test showed a very weak but not significant ($\chi^2=1,377$; $p=0,241$) relationship between gender and the usage of independent travel reviews for the trip to

J&K and an insignificant relationship ($\chi^2=0,26$; $p=0,872$) between gender and social networking sites' usage as shown in table 9 and table : 10 respectively.

Table 9 : Correlation between Age Group, Travel Review Usage concerning trip to J&K

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1,377 ^a	1	,241		
Continuity Correction ^b	,890	1	,346		
Likelihood Ratio	1,396	1	,237		
Fisher's Exact Test				,260	,173
Linear-by-Linear Association	1,361	1	,243		
N of Valid Cases	84				

a. 0 cells (,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 12,55.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Table 10 : Correlation between gender and social networking sites' usage concerning the trip to J&K

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	,026 ^a	1	,872		
Continuity Correction ^b	,000	1	1,000		
Likelihood Ratio	,026	1	,872		
Fisher's Exact Test				1,000	,563
Linear-by-Linear Association	,026	1	,873		
N of Valid Cases	84				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5,26.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

3. Purpose of the trip

To support how the different travelers evaluated the usefulness of the different social media sites while planning their trip Chi-Square test was conducted, which

showed clear significant relationship between the purpose of the trip and the travel reviews' usage (table: 11). Therefore, the result is consistent with existing literature.

Table 11 : Correlation between the purpose of the trip to and travel reviews usage

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10,696 ^a	2	,005
Likelihood Ratio	14,432	2	,001
Linear-by-Linear Association	6,114	1	,013
N of Valid Cases	84		

a. 1 cells (16,7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4,06.

The Chi-Square test showed insignificant ($\chi^2=2,491$; $p=0,288$) correlation between the purpose of the trip and social networking sites' usage (table :12), therefore, it can be

concluded that social networking sites' usage does not depend on the purpose of the trip.

Table 12 : Correlation between the purpose of the trip to and social media site review usage

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2,491 ^a	2	,288
Likelihood Ratio	4,140	2	,126
Linear-by-Linear Association	,000	1	,989
N of Valid Cases	84		

a. 2 cells (33,3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,70.

Table :12

RQ2 : Social media usage in the travel planning process

This section will identify when and how the different social media sites are used in the travel planning process. The question remains whether social media usage can be linked to the pretrip phase, supporting the recognition of the need for vacation by giving inspiration or whether the social media is actively used within the information search and even in the evaluation of alternatives phase. Furthermore, it will be investigated whether social media plays a role as an information

source during the trip and whether after the trip, an evaluation of the purchase takes place within the different social media sites as well

Pre-trip phase of travel planning: Need recognition

While designing the questionnaire it was pre-assumed due to Gretzel & Yoo’s (2008) findings that social media can give inspiration for future travels. Social media’s inspirational role will be discussed in the need recognition phase of the proposed framework of travel planning, as a supportive factor for starting the travel

decision making process. However, it can be acknowledged that inspiration should be more understood in the adaptable understanding of travel planning process than the rational understanding, where the decision making process can be fostered spontaneously by different inspirational factors, even by reviewing certain social media content.

Pre-trip phase of travel planning: Information search-evaluation of alternatives

The aim of this section is to analyze whether and how social media is used in the information search process and even for evaluating the alternatives. Survey show more than half, 51,2 % of all respondents reported to use social media sites for searching for different reviews, such as for hotel, restaurant or attraction. However, social media seems to be not that used for searching for specific campaigns or offers, with only 23 % of the respondents who use it either always or often and with 47,6 % who use it seldom or never.

RQ3 : Perception of the information presented in social media

This section will analyze how travelers perceive the different social media sites and

the content presented on these sites. It will be discussed whether the age as a demographic variable plays an important role in the different perceptions of social media sites. Additionally, it will be pointed out how the official tourism destination promotions are perceived if those are presented on social media sites.

Perceived content of social media

To analyze the travelers' perception of social media multi-choice close-ended questions (q4) were proposed in the survey, questioning the reason of using social media during travel planning. 32% of all respondents did not choose among the given alternatives claiming that they do not use social media. The result of the rest (68%) of the respondents is compiled. The question can be raised here whether there can be seen any age correlation among those 32 % of all respondents who stated not to use social media. Interestingly the Chi-Square test resulted in an insignificant relationship ($\chi^2=0,111$; $p=0,739$; . Therefore, it can be pointed out that the age does not influence whether the respondents perceive or not social media as an information source, and thus, uses it during their travel planning

Table 13: Correlation between age group and not using social media during travel planning

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	,111 ^a	1	,739		
Continuity Correction ^b	,008	1	,930		
Likelihood Ratio	,111	1	,740		
Fisher's Exact Test				,808	,461
Linear-by-Linear Association	,110	1	,740		
N of Valid Cases	84				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 9,32.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Moreover, before starting to analyze in detail the respondents' perception of social media according to the figure (table), it has to be pointed out that the survey question did not give the possibility to answer separately to the diverse types of social media, ranging from independent travel reviews till social networking sites,

although, might have been some discrepancies in the answers regarding to the different social media sites. Moreover, as the below Chi-Square test results (Fig.8.2) show (p=0,024) there is a significant correlation between age groups and using social media for reviewing others' experiences.

Table 14 : Correlation between age groups and using social media for the personal experiences

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5,067 ^a	1	,024		
Continuity Correction ^b	3,879	1	,049		
Likelihood Ratio	5,146	1	,023		
Fisher's Exact Test				,047	,024
Linear-by-Linear Association	4,978	1	,026		
N of Valid Cases	57				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 9,00.

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5,067 ^a	1	,024		
Continuity Correction ^b	3,879	1	,049		
Likelihood Ratio	5,146	1	,023		
Fisher's Exact Test				,047	,024
Linear-by-Linear Association	4,978	1	,026		
N of Valid Cases	57				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 9,00.

Discussion and conclusion

Word-of-mouth recommendations play a high influential role in travelers’ decision-making process, which undoubtedly gives a significant potential to its electronic version, to the eWOM as well. The results of this study confirm previous researches (Gretzel et al., 2008; Litvin et al., 2008; Cox et al. 2009) suggesting that social media sites allowing eWOM are considered as really important information sources during the travel planning process, owing to particular qualities such as informativity and credibility. The findings open up new opportunities for destination marketers, indicating to further exploit social media in their promotional activities. However, in order to take advantage of beneficial features of social media, it is crucial to acknowledge its role in travelers’ decision

making process and the characteristics influencing its usage.

It has been pointed out that social media is used among the majority of the travelers (68%) and is even consulted in the first places among all information sources. Still, clear differences were seen among the different types of social media sites, where the independent travel reviews are considered of much greater importance as information sources than the social networking sites, which can be linked to the perception of the latter. Regarding the influencing factors towards social media’s usage in travel planning a hierarchical structure of the influencing variables was observed. Survey findings indicate that the act and extent of social media usage during travel planning depends on the purpose of the trip alone and not on any demographic variables, such as the age as pre-assumed.

Leisure tourists reported the greatest use of it, following with the VFR tourists while for business tourists it does not play any role as an information source. However, there was found some variation in the way various age groups used social media during travel planning. The younger age group reported greater benefits from the personal recommendations of others and from its audio-visual features than elder group. While in general, travelers use social media for its fast communication abilities, thus, for its low entry barriers and for reviewing others' experiences. Therefore, reaching other travelers' recommendations and comments in a cost effective way are clearly considered important for all travelers, where those informativity and credibility aspect can be claimed. Moreover, social media is mainly used in the pre-trip phase for information search and to narrow down the choices, though it might serve as an inspirational source as well. While during the trip social media is not considered as an adequate information source and is yet underused due to its computer and internet based features.

Further research

This study calls for further extensive research within the field of social media in connection with

destination branding to elaborate on existing theory and the findings of this study. In that this study has taken a broad approach and examined the phenomenon from a rather general point of view, future research could adopt a more narrow approach so as to investigate social media and destination branding in depth. For example, a research centering on a specific destination could be undertaken in order to detect if, when presented with a definite destination rather than many different, consumers would be able to determine if social media influenced their perception of a destination as opposed to igniting a general desire to travel. Additionally, in that case, the research could provide a deeper insight into the importance attached to personal versus impersonal sources. In the same line of research, study should be made of the individual social media so as to measure the different social media's effect on destination brand equity and their separate usefulness with regards to branding. The concept of online interpersonal influence should be investigated into further detail. Being a complex concept, there are many angles from which it can be explored, for example to what extent UGC from either personal or impersonal sources are utilized by tourists at the different stages of a tourism experience,

i.e. before, during, and after. However, this study encourages future research on the role of interpersonal influence to move to the practical. Seen from a management perspective, research is required to assess the possibility of incorporating a personal element into branding strategies. Subsequently, studies should focus on how managers could get around the electronic word-of-mouth and adopt it into their overall marketing strategies so as to benefit from the interpersonal influence. Finally, a study entirely dedicated to investigating the actual influence of consumer reviews on online rating sites should be undertaken so as to identify appropriate managerial strategies, but also, and more importantly, to establish the implications of reviews for destination brands.

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