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Economic and social aspects from social media's implementation as a strategic innovative marketing tool in the tourism industry

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Abstract

The aim of this conceptual paper is to examine social media's central role for the creation of the sense of an online community belonging and present the items that measure their role in the creation of such a community for tourism destinations. From a theoretical perspective, elements such as the specific language, sharing of similar interests and interaction among members, allows us to argue for the sense of belonging to an online community. To date, there are no studies that relate social media with the concept of the imagined communities and sense of belonging. The economic issues emerging from the implementation of social media may be useful for companies and authorities in order to effectively allocate their economic resources.

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1. Introduction

Territorial marketing based on the tourist potential of an area is an effective instrument of economic development through the promotion and the evaluation of the tourist resources of the area. The goal is to achieve a quick and consistent increase in its ability to attract an influx of tourists (Bitsani and Kavoura,

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2011) [1]. Places compete in the interdependent world we live to have visitors. In order for a place to be transformed to a place destination, its recognizability in other words, the creation of branding is required as is for example, visiting a place for its world famous wines or its architecture, thus, creating a tourist identity. This identity is also called ‘competitive brand’ and is based on the elements of the place identity (Anholt in Dinnie, 2008, p. 22) [2]. Since regions compete in the arena of tourists, they need to coordinate their policies, their actions and their communicative strategies in those sectors which promote and reinforce their unique and competitive advantage; this is how their image will be also reinforced, improving and elevating visitors’ experiences (Kavoura, 2013) [3]. Geographic but also organizational entities need to safeguard their sustainability, to raise the numbers of visitors and to have economic viability, promoting the resources they have while implementing their policies in order to communicate their messages to the related target groups (Kavoura, 2013) [3]. Such messages may be communicated with the implementation of social media; nonetheless, their capabilities have not been realized yet. Managers in charge of implementing social media in a company’s or organization’s communication campaigns may be part of the consumer discussions in a manner that is consistent with the organization’s mission via the creation of blogs and networks that bring customers together. In that way, they may enforce the creation of e-communities. The integration of social media into the marketing program of an organization or a company as tools consists of an innovative procedure for the co-creation of experience with the consumer.

This paper argues that social media may create a virtual community which spreads the ‘sense of belonging’ to its members in such a way that they feel as a part of this community even if they have never met. Social media have a significant role to play on the creation of the experience –brand experience on the Internet and the engagement of the consumer to this process with the provision of an ‘e-experience’ and people’s active participation which can be of outmost importance. At a theoretical level, the engagement of the customer with social media, allows us to argue for the creation of a community belonging. The use of such innovative tools may lead to the implementation of on-line communities that can provide valuable information to the enterprises about their target groups. Enterprises and organizations may then have an in-depth knowledge of customers for advertising and marketing their products and services in the digital era. The active role of social media and the economic and social aspects associated with their incorporation to a company’s marketing and communication strategies needs though to be further examined since literature has shown that companies have not fully realized social media’s potential, not to mention the limited research in the tourism industry (Danas and Kavoura, 2013; Hay, 2011; Hays et al., 2013; Katsoni and Laloumis, 2013) [4], [5], [6], [7] which is the focus of this paper. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to enhance current research in the field. To date, no studies associated with social media attempted to theoretically conceptualize the ‘sense of community belonging’ or the concept of the imagined community with social media and their potential to form such a community and examine the online community’s role but also social media’s role in the decisions taken when someone decides to visit a travel destination. This paper presents the items that measure the variables which associate social media with the creation of the sense of belonging. There are economic issues emerging from the implementation of social media, thus, exploring and shedding light on their role with related research, may be useful for organizations, companies and authorities in marketing and communication in tourism but also in other industries since they will be able to effectively allocate their economic resources.

2. Economic considerations and social media

Social media encompass a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums including blogs, company - sponsored discussion boards, chat rooms, consumer product or services rating sites, Internet discussion boards and forums, sites containing digital audio, images, movies and photographs, and social networking websites

among others (Mangold and Faulds 2009) [8]. Primary social media platforms are Facebook and Twitter. As of March 2014, Facebook monthly active users reached 1.28 billion with 802 million daily active users and 1.01 billion mobile monthly active users (facebook.com). Facebook's share of revenue from mobile advertising reached 49 percent in the third quarter of 2013 (Bershidsky, 2013) [9]. Launched in July 2013 Twitter is by far the most popular micro-blogging site. As of September 2013, the company's data showed that 200 million users send over 400 million tweets daily, with nearly 60% of tweets sent from mobile devices. Organizations consider twitter as an excellent way to reach, interact with and understand the consumer behavior of millions around the globe (Hays et al., 2013) [6]. According to recent data, social ad market may reach \$11 billion by 2017, up from \$4.7 billion in 2012 (<http://www.salesforcemarketingcloud.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/The-Facebook-Ads-Benchmark-Report.pdf?b9be0c>) [10] while tremendous capabilities exist for the creation of an online community of users and potential buyers of products and services (<http://techcrunch.com/2012/05/03/stats-facebook-made-9-51-in-ad-revenue-per-user-last-year-in-the-u-s-and-canada/>) [11], providing an innovative marketing tool to organizations. In regard to tourism, TripAdvisor.com has more than 32 million users and over 100 million reviews and is one of the largest travel websites in the world (Katsoni and Laloumis, 2013) [7]. Social media allow the exchange of data; may bring huge revenues via online shopping to the companies with the collection of information about the potential target groups associated with their specific interests (Noff, 2011) [12]. Such figures illustrate, the tremendous capabilities existing with the use of social media and websites and illustrate the power of social media and their economic importance for companies and organizations which can employ social media in their advertising and communication activities and target potential customers all over the world.

3. The importance of social media in building a community belonging

The significant role of fostering engagement opportunities online for targeted groups of a product or a service has been acknowledged although empirical studies of customer engagement behavior on social networking sites are still scarce (Goetz, 2014; Mangold and Faulds, 2009) [13], [8]. More specifically, in regard to the tourism industry, it seems reluctant to make full use of the social media because people involved in the tourism industry are unaware of its full potential (Hay, 2011, Hays et al., 2013) [5], [6]. In fact, they do not believe that social media have such great influence on the consumer's decision primarily because there is too much effort involved (Katsoni and Laloumis, 2013) [7]. According to Xiang and Gretzel (2010) [14], the extent to which social media constitute the online tourism domain is not well understood in an objective, comprehensive way. Nonetheless, social media are becoming more important every day, not only in social life, but also in the tourism business (Katsoni and Laloumis, 2013) [7]. Online reviews in the tourism industry allows for the open access to the experiences of other visitors from all over the world (Katsoni and Laloumis, 2013) [7]. Friends and family could also honestly provide someone with information about a destination; these people are also willing to write a review themselves employing word of mouth communication (Katsoni and Laloumis, 2013) [7]. Within the process of socialization, interaction among members of these social groups takes place and new relationships and friendships are created. When these people begin to learn and trust the brand, or the organization from their friends, the more likely it is to prefer the brand, product/service or the organization. Research has found that the word of mouth from relatives and friends is considered to be very important to the decisions making (Brakus et al., 2009; Andersson and Erkman, 2009; Kavoura, 2013) [15], [16], [3] and this is an opportunity widely offered by social media. In that way, a two way communication exists because people are the receivers and at the same time, the providers of information via social media. People pay special attention to their friends' opinion, which in the digital era is also communicated via the social media. The role of experts has also been found to have influence on the customers (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009) [17].

The paper aims to theoretically associate people's engagement on social media with a sense of belonging to a community, just like the creation of an 'imagined community'. This latter term was initially used in another framework (in regard to elements of nationality and nationalism of a population) by Benedict Anderson in the 1980's to argue that even if people have never met, they may feel that they belong to the same group (Anderson, 1991) [18]. Initially employed in sociology and political sciences Anderson's imagined community is the "politically bounded community where a sense of coherence exists between its members who feel a sense of belonging to the same group even if they have never met" (pp. 6-7) (Anderson, 1991) [18]. This concept, in fact, may be well applied in the social media environment. Such media may provide the opportunity to companies, organizations, Destination Marketing Organizations and reviews' sites such as the Trip Advisor to create an 'imagined community' among their targeted group members all over the world, overcoming any geographical barriers. TripAdvisor.com is an example of a travel website that assists customers in gathering travel information, posting reviews and opinions of travel related content and engaging in interactive travel forums (Katsoni and Laloumis, 2013, p. 127) [7]. In an on-line environment, membership in an exclusive, country-clubbish community, where someone is or wishes to be part of, may be associated with the concept of the imagined community that can be the connecting tie that brings people together and engages them to a place brand. Social media may be considered as a strategic innovative marketing tool to reinforce such a sense of community belonging.

Social media are changing the ways society consumes and contributes to the creation of information (Hays et al., 2013) [6]. With the use of this new technology, individuals can easily contribute their thoughts, opinions, creations and sentiments to the Internet, radically changing the way information is created and diffused (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010) [19], [14]. Two-way, instead of one direction and static communication and diminishing authority from marketers and institutions are the characteristics of this new digital era, which marks a shift from organizations to users taking charge (Schegg et al., 2008) [20]. This illustrates the significant role of social media and the tremendous capabilities existing from their implementation. In fact, social media, may create and reinforce online communities where the members' cooperation and communication exists. The abovementioned take place with like minded people, sharing similar interests. Micro-blog users can also send messages, create stories, are co-creators of a story and contribute to a message sharing for a group of people; in other words, a community is present online and organizations need to realize that it is there. The organization's aim should be to cultivate the feeling of belonging to a group in the real or virtual world which engages consumers and introduces them to a sense of belonging (Kavoura, 2014) [21].

A community has specific characteristics in order to be able to separate itself from others. Kavoura (2014) [21] argued that social media use special symbols and may create an imagined online community similar to Anderson's imagined community, which has specific characteristics that people share, comradeship prevails, a sacred language and written script exist and people share a common interest or idea (Anderson, 1991) [18]. By the same token, social media such as Facebook allows fans to post their own experience and content on an organization page and hence create a much stronger sense of community (Hays et al., 2013) [6]. Facebook allows the usage of media rich in content, encouraging in that way users to interact, comment, share and engage (Hays et al., 2013) [6]. In Twitter, this form of engagement is the 'like' and 'retweet', the use of the hashtag # and the word one wants to identify and share his point of view, an act of approval and engagement to the information provided by an organization. Virtual communities as in the case of traditional communities, are used for the exchange of information and ideas, to share common interests, to entertain people, to offer support, to promote products and services, to create and support relations and emerge when all agree to be

part of them with the aim to use the products and services that are available (Siomkos and Tsiamis, 2004; Kavoura and Bitsani, 2013) [22], [23].

Wang et al. (2002, p. 14) [24] argued that a virtual travel community should bring together a broad range of published content and that the range, richness, reliability and timelessness of information available to members of these virtual communities is likely to be far greater than that of other information available through more conventional means (Hays et al., 2013) [6]. Wang et al. (2002) [24] also argued that since people can now surmount time and space and 'be' anywhere, marketing organizations should adapt accordingly and embrace this new space, as a marketing tool capable of organizing people's knowledge about and desires for the places they want to visit (Hays et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2002) [6], [24]. Such an engagement among the members of an online community may have an impact on brand loyalty. There are many ways which may contribute to the consumers' active participation to an organizations co-creation of a community online framework. Comments' replies consist such an innovative way that may bring the consumer to a community targeted for him/her and aiming to satisfy and fulfill his/her needs (Kavoura, 2014) [25]. Social media strategy implementation and application of services provided on social media such as pre-scheduled posts, ad hoc post launches, comments' replies, competitions via apps or wall contests from companies is a successful way to manage and implement such services. In an information -intensive industry such as tourism social media is of particular importance (Hays et al., 2013; Gretzel et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2002) [6], [14] [24]). Tourism experiences cannot be evaluated prior to consumption and therefore, information and personal recommendations and other travelers' opinions are very influential to the individuals to make informed decisions about destinations (Buhalis, 1998, Gretzel et al., 2000; Litvin et al., 2008; Hays et al., 2013) [26], [27], [28], [6]. The shift from the word -of- mouth- to- the world -of- mouth communication which results from the evolution of social media points out its magnitude and the significance of adapting such practices in tourism marketing (Qualman, 2009; Gretzel et al., 2000, Hjalager, 2010; Ruzic and Bilos, 2010; Hays et al., 2013) [29], [27], [30], [31], [6]. The mobile applications of social media can enhance even more this exchange of information and the participation of users in relevant conversations, reinforcing in such way their engagement. Participation in conversations allows Internet users to exchange their experiences and to share their impressions and feelings about brands, producers, eg. wine growers (Kavoura et al., 2014) [32]. Nonetheless, interaction is not always the case. There are companies and organizations where the interactivity with target audiences does not exist even if social media are present. Empirical research has illustrated that more emphasis should be given to integrated community interrelationship (Vlachvei et al., 2013; Kavoura and Tomaras, 2014) [33], [34].

The provision of network platforms where people with similar interests and desires to their own may create communities of like-minded individuals, where they are able to submit feedback in the form of criticism and helpful suggestions, contributes to a sense of community (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) [8]. Belonging to a group in the real or virtual world engages consumers and introduces them to a sense of belonging, allowing them to have a kind of direct experience with the place brand even if they have never met, just as in the concept of the imagined community. The implementation of new technologies allows for personal contact of an organization with consumers. Social media may in fact be used to engage followers to an organization's activities such as a destination marketing organization, form new relationships and make a meaningful contact with the brand which is what advertisers and marketers also aim. Social media have an important role to play both in a social and economic context and we aim to examine the significance attributed to the social media for the creation and enhancement of a sense of an online community belonging. We specify our research in the tourism industry. The questions are further presented in the next section.

4. Instrument description

This section presents the questions associated with the role of social media in the creation of a sense of a community belonging, aiming to examine the use of social media in visitors' destination choices.

Where do you get information regarding a travel destination? (You may tick more than one replies as appropriate)

Television
 Radio
 Advertisements and Articles on Newspapers and Magazines
 Travel guidebooks and travel magazines
 Internet
 Recommendations from friends and relatives
 Information provided by specialised offices and travel agencies
 Other (specify which)

Which mass media do you attend during the day? (You may tick more than one replies as appropriate)

Television
 Radio
 Newspapers
 Magazines
 Internet
 Other (specify which)

When using the internet for gathering information about a travel destination, which of the following are important to you?

User-sponsored Blogs
 Twitter
 Facebook
 Video Sharing sites (eg. YouTube, Vimeo)
 Photo Sharing sites (eg. Instagram, Flickr)
 Collaborative Websites (eg. Wikipedia)
 News Delivery Sites
 Social Bookmarking Sites (eg. Digg)
 Mobile Applications
 Official websites/blogs of the destination
 Company sponsored web sites/blogs

Please state your degree of agreement/ disagreement with the following sentences.

When gathering information about a travel destination:

Completely Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Completely Agree

I take into consideration other users' comments on social media

I take into consideration online recommendations from friends and relatives

I take into consideration experts' online comments
 I take into consideration online reviews (eg trip advisor)

When choosing a destination, how much attention do you pay on advertisements associated with travel destinations through the following sources?

Not at all important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

User-sponsored Blogs

Twitter

Facebook

Video Sharing sites (eg. YouTube, Vimeo)

Photo Sharing sites (eg. Instagram, Flickr)

Collaborative Websites (eg. Wikipedia)

News Delivery Sites

Social Bookmarking Sites (eg. Digg)

Mobile Applications

Official websites/blogs of the destination

Company sponsored web sites/blogs

Emails

Text Messages

Television

Radio

Newspapers

Magazines

Travel guidebooks and travel magazines

None of the above

Other (specify which)

As a member of an online travel community

Completely Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Completely Agree

I trust more the comments made by members of an online community

I feel engaged with the other members of the online travel community

I feel proximate (close) to the other members of the online travel community even if we have never met

It is important for me to belong to an online travel community

When you belong to an online travel community, you feel that you share a specific code of communication with the other members as far as:

Completely Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Completely Agree

language specification requirements (eg. hashtags, #, @, slang language)

uploading personal material associated with a travel destination

style of writing

aesthetics of photos

aesthetics of design
association of ideas

Please state your degree of agreement/ disagreement with the following sentences.

When gathering information about a travel destination,

Completely Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Completely Agree

I am primarily concerned about Price
I am primarily concerned about Accommodation types and amenities
I am primarily concerned about Natural Environment
I am primarily concerned about Culture
I am primarily concerned about Eno-gastronomical resources
I am primarily concerned about Recreation
Other (please specify)

How often do you use your mobile phone in order to have access to social media travel destinations?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Always

How often do you use your computer (also laptop, ipad) in order to have access to social media travel destinations?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Always

Which of the following do you do on your mobile phone?

Please check all that apply

Go to social media
Check your e-mails
Take a photo
GPS
Skype
You tube
Phone call
Look for information on the Internet
Buy products
Text message
None of the above

5. Implications for managing communication on social medial with targeting the sense of community belonging

In the new digital era, activities and services, organizations or even place brands may be promoted with the contribution of social media. The primary challenge of digital technologies is to connect the individual with the whole, in other words, individual consumers with other consumers and with brands. Microblogging proposes a dialogical style and manner of communication that is coherent with the habits customers display in their current virtual communities (Schegg et al., 2008) [20]. The promotion of brands, services and products with the use of different types of digital advertising and communications should nowadays be more strategically employed by organizations in order to reach customers. This kind of communications uses digital

media for the dissemination of promotional messages in an attempt to promote interactivity and raise their effectiveness. In that way, companies and organizations aim in both servicing and engaging their customers. Interrelation among members and a sense of belonging exists in virtual communities even if people do not meet with each other. The incorporation of social media into the organizations' communication and advertising activities has not yet though been fully implemented as far as this interaction with consumers. It is a necessity to further examine the relations that are formed with such a sense of belonging to an online community and how these relationships can further enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, an ongoing research may take place in order to shed light to the economic and social aspects emerging from such a community belonging. There is suggestion from the literature that the sense of belonging and the creation of online communities need to be further explored and examined (Stavrianea and Kavoura, 2014) [35]. The social media networking has a lot to offer to such innovative advertising and communication with existing and potential target groups. Since physical and digital world will be inextricably connected, iPhone applications and mobile technology-with which people are linked to their profile on Facebook and Twitter, allow the exchange of data and bring up such interaction (Romeri, 2014 [36]. People want to engage with friends, keep up with new developments, and connect with new people; thus, the creation of a community which shares common elements is what companies need to put emphasis on (Lee, 2013) [37]. The economic benefits of social media in companies' strategic marketing decisions, makes the study of social media and the way customers respond to them a necessity so that specific measurements and decisions can take place in regard to the connection that exists between social media and people. In that way, more informed decisions can be made by the organizations in terms of allocating their advertising budget. Results from this and similar researches may help organizations and companies, even countries to better allocate their economic resources and efforts in order to take advantage of the use of social media.

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