

Destination Marketing Organizations' Social Media Usage: A Research on Balkan Countries

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Abstract

Social media has fundamentally reshaped the way tourism related information is distributed and the way people plan for and consume travel. Since social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter and Trip Advisor began allowing businesses to create profiles and become active members, businesses have started incorporating these strategies into their marketing efforts. For Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) have used these sites to promote special offers, for customer service and strengthen their existing brands; however, little is known about how DMOs are taking advantage of the social media marketing popularity. The aim of this study is to explore the usage of social media among the DMOs of Balkan countries through a content analysis of Balkan countries' official web site profiles. Also this study examines how social media is being used by the DMOs to enhance their brands and to reach potential visitors. This study confirms the growing importance of social media in the online tourism domain and mostly DMOs use only Facebook and Twitter as a social media tools. Solely having a profile will not in itself increase awareness. DMOs should use more social networking sites to communicate with their consumers and give them the ability to broadcast opinions about services.

Key words: Social Media Marketing, DMOs, Balkans

Introduction

Social media has reshaped the way tourism related information is distributed and the way people plan for and consume travel (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media exist in a variety of forms and serve numerous purposes. This includes a variety of applications in the technical sense which allow consumers to "post", "tag", "digg", or "blog", and so forth, on the Internet (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Social media are changing the way society consumes and contributes to the creation of information. Technology now allows individuals to easily contribute their thoughts, opinions and creations to the Internet (Hays, Page and Buhalis, 2012)









Social media is one of the fastest growing segments on the web, and it includes social sharing of opinions through blogs and micro blogs (i.e. Blogger and Twitter), social photo and video sharing (i.e. Flickr and YouTube), social sharing of knowledge (i.e. Wikipedia), social bookmarking (i.e. Delicious) and many other forms of user-generated content. These

social media tools allow users to search, organize, share, annotate and contribute to contents in a collaborative way. It is of vital importance that tourism organization managers and destination policy makers understand the antecedents of the tourists' use and adoption of social media before, during and after their trips due to the impact of these collaborative behaviors on tourists' decisions about the choice of all the elements of the trip (destination, accommodation, activities, restaurants) (Parra-López et al., 2011).

Social media websites, facilitate consumer-generated content, and are widely used by online travellers' (Gretzel, 2006). According to Forrester (2009), 86 percent of marketers surveyed believed social media was the most popular emerging channel and would increase more than any other marketing tool over the next three years. Further supporting that claim, the research company predicts that social media will generate \$935 million in 2010, and by 2014, that number will soar to over \$3.1 billion. Recommendations from personal acquaintances or opinions posted by consumers online are the most trusted forms of advertising, according to the latest Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey of over 25,000 Internet consumers from 50 countries. Ninety percent of consumers surveyed noted that they trust recommendations from people they know, while 70 percent trusted consumer opinions posted online (Nielsen, 2009).

Social media is becoming the primary medium by which travel information is shared (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Hence travellers engage in social media to satisfy any number of needs – from functional, social, hedonic, to psychological – it stands to reason that DMOs must be prepared to engage travellers (Parra-Lopez et al., 2011). Common social media applications include Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Pinterest, and Youtube. There are key social media networks that DMO need to consider as they could help DMO Successfully market their business online and distinguish them from their competitors. Some of the powerful social media sites have been provided below (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Powerful Social Media Networks

Name	Medium	Audience	Required Account Type
 Facebook	Mixed (text, images, video etc) www.facebook.com	1 billion + worldwide. Not restricted to clients or connections	Business page
 Twitter	140 character text & images www.twitter.com	500 million + worldwide. Not restricted to clients or connections	Standard account
 Google +	Mixed (text, images, video etc) plus.google.com	250 million + worldwide. Not restricted to clients or connections	Standard account
 YouTube	Videos www.youtube.com	800 million +each month. Not restricted to clients or connections	Standard account with business profile
 TripAdvisor	Text reviews & related images www.tripadvisor.com	60 million +monthly Visitors worldwide	Standard business account Can upgrade to paid account if preferred
 Blogging	Mixed (text, images, video etc)	Any internet user	Part of your website or via a platform such as Blogger or Word Press
 Flickr	Images www.flickr.com	6 billion + images worldwide Not restricted to clients or connections	Standard account
 Pinterest	Images www.pinterest.com	100 million visits in February 2012	Standard account

Source: http://www.atdw.com.au/media/1514/Tutorial_40_Social_Media_For_Tourism.pdf

(DMOs) use many different approaches for promoting their areas. With the growing popularity of the Internet, it is important for DMOs to understand the travel behaviors of Web site users (Siu-ian and Alastair, 2003). The integration of information technologies into the organizational fabric of the DMO is an important key to success (Gretzel, Yuan and Fesenmaier, 2000). Destination marketing practices are greatly influenced by advances in information technology due to the fragmented and information intensive nature of destination products (Buhalis, 1998). The most significant trend is the accelerating speed of technological development. The consequence of this rapid change is the emergence of innovative Web-based technologies that lead to a reconfiguration of the environment in which tourism business is conducted. Understanding these changes is crucial for creating a vision in the tourism organization that things are going to evolve (Gretzel, Yuan and Fesenmaier, 2000). Beside this, the effective use of Web-based marketing activities is pivotal not only for marketing and promoting destinations but also for creating a competitive advantage for them (Buhalis, 2000). People who use social media do so not only to find pertinent information, but also as a means of socializing with others and for enjoyment purposes. One of the benefits of social media from the supplier side is that DMOs can collaborate and streamline their information, adding value for consumers, while building their brand through direct interaction with the consumer, and immediate response to consumer queries and concerns. Consumers, on the other hand, benefit by receiving what they perceive as more authentic information based on the experience of other travellers, and can design their trips to reflect more closely what they are looking for by interacting with both experienced travellers and residents of a destination (Lange-Faria and Eliot, 2012). The social media tools offer travel reviews and discussion forums and facilitates tourists' decision-making process. Consequently, internet and social media sites are getting more important for marketing of tourism destinations and organizations. Thus, the aim of this study is seeks to understand the usage of social media among the national marketing organizations of Balkan tourism countries.

Methodology

The Balkans, often referred to as the Balkan Peninsula, and recently also as "Southeast Europe", although none of the three exactly share borders, is a geopolitical and cultural region of southeastern Europe. The region takes its name from the Balkan Mountains in Bulgaria and Serbia. The term "Balkan" is generally believed to come from Turkish *balkan*, meaning "a chain of wooded mountains. "The name is still preserved in Central Asia with the Balkan Mountains and the Balkan Province of Turkmenistan. The Balkans comprise the following territories; Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey and Slovenia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balkans).

Although there are many prior studies on tourism website analysis, only a few of them focused on social media tools on web site of DMOs. In the present study, information was gathered from official web sites of national DMOs which are in Balkans. The reason of choosing Balkan countries is prior studies on some Balkan countries' tourism websites were only attempted by a few researchers. This research makes an attempt to establish a checklist of social media sites for assessing DMOs website. Each homepage was reviewed and recorded first, and then each social media sites' link on the homepage was clicked to review and the information was recorded. In order to keep the items current, the list was revised based on careful observations of Balkan DMOs' websites at different levels by the research team. To understand the usage of social media of Balkan DMOs' websites, this study includes all

their websites. Addresses of the DMOs' websites were obtained through several searches of the Internet using keyword searches including the names of each country (e.g. Croatia or Albania official tourism board etc.). Twelve DMOs websites were selected for all countries in Balkans. The evaluators were requested to evaluate DMO websites based on a rating scale. The scale used in this research included exists (1) and absent (0). Websites has been visited once, between 10 – 16 April 2013, as for their dynamic structure.

Findings

This research assesses the usage of social media tools of Balkan countries DMOs' websites. The objective of the research is achieved by content analysis of all twelve official country tourism websites regarding the selected social media sites.

Table 1. Official DMOs Web Sites of Balkan Countries

No	Countries	Official Web Site
1	Albania	www.albaniantourism.com
2	Bosnia and Herzegovina	www.bhtourism.ba
3	Bulgaria	www.bulgariatravel.org
4	Croatia	www.croatia.hr
5	Greece	www.visitgreece.gr
6	Kosovo	www.visitkosovo.org
7	Macedonia	www.exploringmacedonia.com
8	Montenegro	www.montenegro.travel/en
9	Romania	www.romaniatourism.com
10	Serbia	www.serbia.travel
11	Slovenia	www.slovenia.info
12	Turkey	www.goturkey.com

Balkan countries DMOs' web sites are presented in Table 1. According to Table 1, all of twelve countries have an official national web site. The majority of DMOs are already at abeginning stage in their use of the social media for customer relationship management and marketing. Based on the detailed evaluation of DMOs web sites, the key research findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Social Media Sites Usage of DMOs

Social Media Sites	Exists		Absent		Total	
	F	%	f	%	F	%
Facebook	9	75	3	25	12	100
Twitter	9	75	3	25	12	100
Youtube / Vimeo	8	67	4	33	12	100
Pinterest	3	25	9	75	12	100
Foursquare	3	25	9	75	12	100
Google +	3	25	9	75	12	100
Tripadvisor	3	25	9	75	12	100
Instagram	2	17	10	83	12	100
Flickr	2	17	10	83	12	100
Blog	1	8	11	92	12	100

Table 2 shows a breakdown usage of social media sites. Accordingly, DMOs represent themselves by creating a profile in social networks, mainly 75 % (9) on Facebook and 75 % (9) Twitter and then in the order of YouTube (67 %). In connection with this it is seen that DMOs prefer using Facebook and twitter mostly. Three of DMOs used Pinterst, Foursquare and Google Plus of the all social media applications. Only two of DMOs used Instagram and Flickr as photo sharing networks.

However, Volo (2010) stated that blogs are frequently shared with friends and family and do influence how a travel destination is perceived, the social media sites ranged from the highest score of 9 in Facebook usage to the lowest score of 1 in blog usage. Only one of the DMOs studied were using a blog- Greece. The majority of the DMOs used their websites mainly for information-oriented features related to activities, accommodations and attractions, but offered limited social media activities through their websites. The social media linkage was the weakest. The results indicated that Balkan DMOs were making limited use of social media in their official web sites. While some countries are really good at promoting themselves with social media tool, others need some serious work.

Table 3. Top Three Social Media Sites Usage of DMOs

Countries	Twitter		Facebook		Youtebe		
	Followers	Tweets	Likes	Talking About	Subscribers	Views	Video
A	21.799	14.909	78.642	16.045	3.094	4.284.231	125
B	*	-	-	-	-	-	-
C	301	745	6.042	698	634	376.314	525
D	6.411	1.443	813.744	29.282	1.491	1.315.536	74
E	1768	535	113	5	-	-	-
F	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
G	527	95	1475	44	25	0	6
H	6.611	146	-	-	234	92.874	12
I	875	319	2.186	49	734	166.463	44
J	6.003	6.917	33.081	2.756	521	52.206	25
K	260	211	3.947	2.088	-	-	-
L	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

As can be seen, Table 3 shows breakdown of top three social media sites usage of Balkan countries national DMOs' web sites. Beside this Table 3 summarizes the statistics of DMOs' tweets, likes and views. One measure of a Twitter user's effectiveness is the number of followers it has attracted. DMOs have followers between 260 and 21.799. When considering Facebook usage of DMOs, it can be seen that they have likes between 113 and 813.744. DMOs have average 6 and 525 videos on YouTube. The results indicated that national DMOs have made little progress in their adoption of social media applications and technologies.

Conclusion

On a global scale, social media use is growing, and the challenge is for destination marketing organizations to effectively choose not only which applications to use, but also

to identify what consumers want from their sites and what elements to include in the site that will most effectively influence the traveller decision making process, socially, virtually, and authentically (Lange-Faria and Eliot, 2012).

The main conclusion of this paper is that the official web sites of Balcan countries DMOs have been slow to respond to the social media marketing opportunities. DMOs use only a few common social media tools at the basic, experimental level. This research shows a high level of awareness concerning the customer engagement potential of social media. However, major barriers to social media adoption exist, especially in effective usage.

The results supported the argument and suggested that DMOs should pay more attention to the quality of their social media marketing features. Thus, it is vital for DMOs to move to more sophisticated level of social media use to provide a deeper engagement in their websites to satisfy exist and potential visitors.

This study should be of interest to researchers as well as industry professionals by applying social media tools to DMOs' websites. The findings of the research enable managers of DMOs to understand how effective their websites from the social media usage perspective. Also the results will assist DMOs managers in assessing their website performance so that they have useful information to facilitate continuous improvement.

While this study has provided important results, some of the limitations for future research are stressed. The important limitation of this study is limited to only Balkan countries. Also, data can be collected and analyzed over different time periods to understand the changing patterns of usage of social media marketing activities. However, in spite of these limitations, we hope that the present study has provided an interesting way of understanding the social media approach of DMOs.

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