

THE ROLE OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN INCREASING TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS

Sonja Oklobdžija

Business School of Applied Studies,
Blace, Serbia

Abstract:

Tourist experience is the most important tourism product. However, the quality of experience is a relatively neglected topic in tourism-related literature. Better understanding of the quality of experience that tourists had during their visit can provide information needed to further develop the destination and enhance its competitiveness by adjusting its services to tourists' needs. In addition, high quality of experience triggers the human need of sharing that experience. People have always shared their positive experience with their friends and peers, and with recent development of information technologies, sharing experience implies sharing it online as well. The aim of this paper is to show the importance of offering tourists high quality experience in order to share their opinions and recommendations online, making them available for other tourists, which will consequently enhance tourism destination competitiveness. In order to reach the conclusion, the paper will show the results of the research on the degree that Serbian tourists rely on user-generated content when choosing a destination and making additional travel choices. The data collected were analysed using the statistical analysis software SPSS, version 23.

Keywords:

quality of experience, online reviews, travel-related content, social media.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a service industry, that is, an industry where no tangible goods are produced, but only services are provided to its consumers. In fact, the most important tourism product is the tourist experience. It displays all the characteristics of services - it is intangible, inseparable from production, and it lacks heterogeneity and ownership (Williams and Soutar, 2009). The beneficial experience the visitors gain during their trip is an integral component of the tourism product (Pernecky and Jamal, 2010). The importance of service quality has been well documented in the tourism-related literature. However, the importance of the quality of experience has been relatively neglected, probably due to the fact that the quality of experience is subjective and, therefore, hard to measure. The quality of experience can be defined as "the subjective personal reactions and feelings felt by consumers when consuming or using a service" (Chen and Chen, 2010, p. 29). Better understanding of the quality of experience that tourists had during their visit can provide information needed to further develop the destination and enhance its competitiveness by adjusting its services to tourists' needs. In addition, high quality of experience triggers the human need of sharing that experience. People have always shared their positive

Correspondence:
Sonja Oklobdžija

e-mail:
sonja.oklobdzija@gmail.com



experience with their friends and peers, and with the recent development of information technologies, sharing experience implies sharing it online as well. Therefore, shared experiences are more public than ever and have the ability of reaching almost every person in the world.

As the number of tourists worldwide is rising, so are their expectations and needs for more detailed information. As a result, new and better ways of informing potential tourists about the various options available to them have become more important than ever. The appropriate marketing strategy has always been the basis of achieving and maintaining tourism destination competitiveness by offering potential tourists the opportunity to find the exact information they are looking for. However, the internet has completely changed the way travel-related information is distributed, as well as the way tourists access information, plan and book their trips and share travel experiences (Buhalis and Law, 2008). Nowadays, modern tourists do not rely solely on the information sent directly by the travel organizations or companies, but they also rely on online reviews and recommendations posted by other tourists who shared their quality of experience. Social media websites, representing various forms of user-generated content (UGC) such as blogs, virtual communities, social networks, reviews and media files shared on various internet sites have gained substantial popularity in online travelers' use of the Internet (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Many social media websites help users with posting and sharing comments, opinions and experiences related to travel, which then serve as information to other users. With the growing popularity of user-generated content, consumers are gaining significantly more power in product development and distribution of information on the internet, while the authority of marketers and tourism organizations and companies is declining (Thevenot, 2007). Therefore, travel organizations and companies no longer have ultimate control over the image of their destination or product (Hays *et al.*, 2013). Since tourism is "information-rich" industry (Gretzel *et al.*, 2000, p. 147), user-generated content is extremely important for the tourism sector. There have always been tourists who turned to recommendations of others in pursuit of information about their future trips, and nowadays, online reviews and recommendations have become an inexhaustible source of referrals. Tourism products and services are intangible. Therefore, other people's recommendations can significantly influence one's willingness to purchase them (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). User-generated content has become an additional source of information that tourists consider part of their information seeking process, and social media websites have become an es-

sential part of travel-related information search (Leung *et al.*, 2013). What makes people share their opinion about their trip is either a very high or very low quality of experience. Online travel community is considered a source of credible information for potential tourists since it provides valuable criticism and recommendations (Chung and Buhalis, 2008). Therefore, tourism organizations and companies should ensure that the experiences they offer are as real, compelling and memorable as possible, in order to engage each customer in an inherently personal way (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) and incite them to share their quality of experience online.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to show the importance of offering tourists high quality experience in order for them to share their opinions and recommendations online, which will consequently enhance tourism destination competitiveness. In order to reach the conclusion, the paper will show the results of the research on the degree that Serbian tourists rely on user-generated content while choosing a destination and making additional travel choices. For that purpose, a questionnaire was used for data collection. All the questions were multiple-choice questions. The survey was conducted online on a random sample of the population of the Republic of Serbia for the period from March 30, 2016 until April 15, 2016. The data collected were analysed using the statistical analysis software SPSS, version 23. The questionnaire was answered by a total of 444 respondents. However, only those respondents who claimed to regularly use digital media as a source of information while choosing a tourism destination were taken into account, thus including a total of 296 valid respondents. The research was based on the following hypotheses:

General hypothesis:

- H0 – Tourists rely on online reviews and recommendations to a great extent while choosing a tourism destination and making additional travel choices.

Specific hypotheses:

- H1 – Younger tourist are more prone to relying on online reviews and recommendations than the older ones.
- H2 – Tourists rarely write reviews.
- H3 – Tourist are prone to sharing travel-related content on social media.
- H4 – Facebook is social media website that most tourists use for sharing travel-related content



RESULTS

First of all, the respondents had to choose the digital media they mostly rely on while choosing a tourism destination. The data collected shows that 33.5% of the respondents rely on the recommendations of other tourists. In addition, 75.7% of the respondents rely on the results of their own internet search, 51.6% of them use official web pages of tourism destinations, and 17.9% find the information needed on social media, while 8.1% of the respondents rely on promotional material received via email. The following step was to establish whether the respondents rely on reviews while making additional travel choices. The overall results show that only 9.5% of the respondents do not rely on reviews, while 90.5% of them do. Those who do rely on reviews declared that they do it for the following reasons: 64.9% of them use reviews to help them with choosing accommodation, 37.8% for choosing the best attraction to visit in a destination, 32.1% for choosing local restaurants, 31.4% for informing about entertainment choices, 27% for choosing optional excursions and 21.3% for choosing means of transportation. However, when asked whether they write reviews and recommendations, as much as 73.6% of the respondents declared that they do not write them, 17.6% of the respondents said that they write reviews about the accommodation, 11.5% of them write reviews about the tourism destination itself, 7.8% write reviews about the local restaurants, 5.7% about entertainment choices in the destination, and 5.7% about the attractions in a destination. On the other hand, when asked whether they share travel-related content on social media, only 27.7% of the respondents declared that they never do. The rest of the respondents answered in the following way: 60.5% share their travel photographs, 23.6% check-in on Facebook while travelling, 17.2% share travel-related statuses on Facebook, 12.5% share travel videos, 5.7% write in forums about their experience, 4.05% tweet about their trip and 2.4% write a travel-related blog. Only the respondents who share travel-related photographs or videos were asked to determine the social media website they are most likely to share them on, *i.e.*, 177 respondents answered the question about sharing travel-related photographs, and 37 of them responded about sharing travel-related videos. The majority of the respondents chose Facebook – 92.1% of them share photographs and 81.1% share videos on this social network. Facebook is followed by Instagram where 52.5% of the respondents share their travel-related photographs, and 70.3% of them share videos. The rest of the social media were selected by significantly fewer respondents and can therefore be disregarded in this paper.

DISCUSSION

Numerous conclusions can be drawn based on the data collected and presented herein. First of all, the data showed that a third of the respondents rely on online reviews and recommendations while choosing a tourism destination, which is not an insignificant percentage. However, the great majority of the respondents, that is, a staggering 90.5% of them answered that they rely on online reviews and recommendations while making additional travel choices. In addition, in order to make an assumption on the basis of the sample about the percentage of tourists in general population that rely on online reviews and recommendations while making additional travel choices, a new variable was created in SPSS called “Reviews”. The variable contains two values – “I rely on reviews” and “I don’t rely on reviews”. Therefore, the specific choice of reviews that the respondents rely on is disregarded; the only important information is that they rely on them. After performing the one-sample binomial test and testing different proportions, we can draw a conclusion that the percentage of tourists that relies on online reviews and recommendations in general population is between 88% and 93%. Fig. 1 shows the results of the one-sample binomial test. Therefore, the general hypothesis H0 claiming that tourists rely on online reviews and recommendations to a great extent while choosing a tourism destination and making additional travel choices is accepted.

In order to establish whether there is a difference in the degree of relying on online reviews and recommendations between younger and older respondents, the respondents were divided into two groups – younger than 40 and older than 40, since 40 years old was the mean value of the age groups offered in the questionnaire. Table 1 shows that a significantly larger percentage of younger respondents relies on online reviews and recommendations compared to the older ones. Therefore, the hypothesis H1 claiming that younger tourists are more prone to relying on online reviews and recommendations than the older ones is accepted.

Another important conclusion that can be drawn from the data presented in the paper is that even though the majority of the respondents are influenced by reviews and recommendations of other tourists, they themselves are very reluctant to write them. The data collected showed that as much as 73.6% of the respondents never write online reviews and recommendations, which leads to the acceptance of the hypothesis H2. However, they are not reluctant to share different types of travel-related content. All the respondents that share



	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision		Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The categories defined by Reviews = I rely on reviews and I don't rely on reviews occur with probabilities 0.87 and 0.13.	One-Sample Binomial Test	.042	Reject the null hypothesis.	1	The categories defined by Reviews = I rely on reviews and I don't rely on reviews occur with probabilities 0.88 and 0.12.	One-Sample Binomial Test	.105	Retain the null hypothesis.
1	The categories defined by Reviews = I rely on reviews and I don't rely on reviews occur with probabilities 0.93 and 0.07.	One-Sample Binomial Test	.061	Retain the null hypothesis.	1	The categories defined by Reviews = I rely on reviews and I don't rely on reviews occur with probabilities 0.94 and 0.06.	One-Sample Binomial Test	.009	Reject the null hypothesis.

Figure 1. One-Sample Binominal Test – accepting general hypothesis (Source: Author)

Table 1. Cross tabulation showing the percentage of younger and older respondents relying on online reviews and recommendations

			Age		Total
			Older than 40	Younger than 40	
Reviews	I don't rely on reviews	Count	7	21	28
		% of Total	2.4%	7.1%	9.5%
	I rely on reviews	Count	51	217	268
		% of Total	17.2%	73.3%	90.5%
Total		Count	58	238	296
		% of Total	19.6%	80.4%	100.0%

Source: Author

some type of travel-related content on social media were grouped regardless of their choice of reviews they rely on. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents sharing travel-related content as opposed to those who do not. As can be noted, the majority of respondents gladly share the details about their trip, thus creating user-generated content about the tourism destination

they were visiting as well. In conclusion, the hypothesis H3 claiming that tourists are prone to sharing travel-related content on social media is accepted.

Lastly, the data collected showed that Facebook is the most popular choice for sharing travel-related content. The majority of respondents share their travel-related videos and photographs on this social network. In addi-

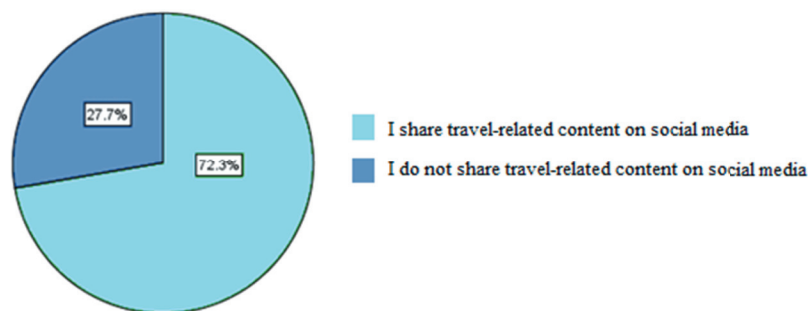


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents sharing travel-related content on social media (Source: Author)

Table 2. Sharing travel-related content on Facebook

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	I do not share travel-related content on Facebook	113	38.2	38.2	38.2
	I share travel-related content on Facebook	183	61.8	61.8	100.0
	Total	296	100.0	100.0	

Source: Author



tion, many respondents answered that they check-in on Facebook while travelling or post travel-related statuses. In order to prove that tourists mostly use Facebook for sharing travel-related content, the respondents were divided into two groups, those who selected Facebook for sharing at least one type of travel-related content, and those who did not select Facebook at all. Table II shows that 61.8% of the respondents use Facebook for sharing their travel-related content, while 38.2% of them do not. Therefore, the hypothesis H4 claiming that Facebook is a social media website that most of the tourists use for sharing travel-related content is accepted.

CONCLUSION

The Internet has become an indispensable part of modern life. It is not just a one-way source of information such as traditional media, but a system based on the exchange of information, and therefore a very important instrument used in tourism. Internet connects companies with companies, companies with tourists, and tourists among themselves, which significantly enhances modern tourists' options for information search. Over the last few years, a number of online tools have emerged helping users to create and share their own content. Nowadays, different types of internet websites are available for modern tourists enabling them to publicly express their opinions and feelings at every moment of their trip and share that information with other tourists (Munoz-Leiva *et al.*, 2012). Thanks to the new applications and internet websites available, tourists are able to find more useful and personalized information tailored to their tastes and preferences (Doolin *et al.*, 2002), enabling them to quickly and easily find the desired destination or accommodation (Brown and Chalmers, 2003). User-generated content available on the internet is playing an increasingly important role in informing modern tourists (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008).

This paper presented the results of the research on the degree that Serbian tourists rely on user-generated content while choosing a destination and making additional travel choices. The data collected showed that online reviews and recommendations play a very important role in modern tourists' information-seeking process. In addition, tourists who are not prone to writing online reviews and recommendations gladly share their travel-related content on social media, mostly on Facebook, which increases the amount of user-generated content available for other tourists. The research is based on the assumption that high quality of experience leads to tourists sharing their travel-related content on social media or writing an online recommendation,

which consequently increases tourism destination competitiveness. Further research is needed in order to determine the degree of correlation between the quality of experience and willingness to share that experience online with other tourists.

REFERENCES

- Brown, B., & Chalmers, M. (2003). Tourism and mobile technology. In *ECSCW 2003* (pp. 335-354). Netherlands: Springer. doi: 10.1007/978-94-010-0068-0_18
- Buhalis, D., & Law, R. (2008). Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20 years on and 10 years after the Internet: The state of eTourism research. *Tourism management*, 29(4), 609-623. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2008.01.005
- Chen, C. F., & Chen, F. S. (2010). Experience quality, perceived value, satisfaction and behavioral intentions for heritage tourists. *Tourism management*, 31(1), 29-35. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2009.02.008
- Chung, J. Y., & Buhalis, D. (2008). Information needs in online social networks. *Information Technology & Tourism*, 10(4), 267-281. doi:10.3727/109830508788403123
- Doolin, B., Burgess, L., & Cooper, J. (2002). Evaluating the use of the Web for tourism marketing: a case study from New Zealand. *Tourism management*, 23(5), 557-561. doi:10.1016/S0261-5177(02)00014-6
- Gretzel, U., & Yoo, K. H. (2008). Use and impact of online travel reviews. *Information and communication technologies in tourism 2008* (pp. 35-46). doi:10.1007/978-3-211-77280-5_4
- Gretzel, U., Yuan, Y., & Fesenmaier, D. (2000). Preparing for the new ecomadvertising strategies and change in destination marketing organizations. *Journal of Travel Research*, 39(2), 149-156. doi:10.1177/004728750003900204
- Hays, S., Page, S. J., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media as a destination marketing tool: its use by national tourism organisations. *Current issues in Tourism*, 16(3), 211-239. doi:10.1080/13683500.2012.662215
- Leung, D., Law, R., van Hoof, H., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social Media in Tourism and Hospitality: A Literature Review. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(1-2), 3-22. doi:10.1080/10548408.2013.750919
- Litvin, S. W., Goldsmith, R. E., & Pan, B. (2008). Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. *Tourism management*, 29(3), 458-468. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2007.05.011
- Munoz-Leiva, F., Hernández-Méndez, J., & Sánchez-Fernández, J. (2012). Generalising user behaviour in online travel sites through the Travel 2.0 website acceptance model. *Online Information Review*, 36(6), 879-902. doi:10.1108/14684521211287945



- Pernecky, T., & Jamal, T. (2010). (Hermeneutic) Phenomenology in tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 37(4), 1055-1075. doi:10.1016/j.annals.2010.04.002
- Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1998). Welcome to the experience economy. *Harvard Business Review*, 76, 97-105.
- Thevenot, G. (2007). Blogging as a social media. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 7(3/4), 282-289.
- Williams, P., & Soutar, G. N. (2009). Value, satisfaction and behavioral intentions in an adventure tourism context. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 36(3), 413-438.
- Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism management*, 31(2), 179-188.