SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE BY TOURISM COMPANIES AND THEIR BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMICS

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Abstract
Digitalization has provided many advances in the hospitality and tourism sector. Some accommodations have already implemented major changes by integrating new technologies to turn the guest experience into something unexpected and even incredible. Even if the micro-enterprises in the tourism sector have a reputation for focusing on business survival and not being risk takers, and with a limited innovation desire, the technology permeates most aspects of modern tourism business. In order to survive, tourism SMEs need to invest in digitalization. Destinations, businesses and the wider tourism sector will need to fully embrace these new technologies, in order to remain competitive and take advantage of innovation, productivity and value creation potential. Thus, tourism companies need to understand that social media and digital media are important for their future development and to incorporate them in the corporate strategies. The present paper aims to investigate social media usage of tourism companies in Timis County, as a pilot study and how the COVID-19 pandemics changed their behaviour.

Key words: *behavior, blogs, budget, social media, tourism companies*

JEL Classification: *D83, Z33*

I.INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, search engines ensure the connection between tourism businesses or tourism destinations and travellers, as they are looking for information to plan their trips (Munar, 2012; Lee, Yoon and Park, 2017). Tourism business and destinations needs to face new challenges as it regards information and communication technologies' usage, as social media are displaying new types and functionality tools (Schaffer, 2015).

Social media technologies display a myriad of websites where tourists may share travel experiences. Platforms, such as Facebook.com, TripAdvisor.com and Instagram.com, redesigned the world of information exchange, as the travellers not only communicate, but also develop relationships, interact with the destinations to enrich travel experiences (Choe, Kim, et al, 2017).

In time, social media has become a word-of-mouth marketing tool, speeding up communication processes and direct interactions between organisations and larger audience, the last ones being transformed into advocates for the tourism destinations and operators (Camilleri, 2018). Travel reviews posted in social media platforms support the share of travel information and increase communication among tourists.

Travellers are not passive anymore, as they make reviews, add comments, make recommendations, post online-content, actively participating to the creation, distribution of travel-related stories, movies, photos (Choe, Kim et al, 2017). In this way, travellers create meanings of their tourism experience with impact on other travellers' emotions, feelings, and desires. This widespread connectivity available through mobile devices and smart-phones allows inexperienced travellers to take trips in different regions and both discover and share experiences.

Future travel experiences live through tourist senses that use social media platforms. This information and virtual experiences gathered from all around the world enriches tourists' involvement (Osei, Mensah and Amenumey, 2018). These developments will continue in a more rapid path as costumers will adopt more travel-related apps and as tourists want for their travel experiences to become more visible (Buckley, Gretzel et al, 2015).

Previous researches mainly focused on the perceptions of travellers on social media, while limited consideration has been given to the perceptions of tourism providers on the use of these

platforms. The present research aims to investigate companies' official presences on social platforms and their involvement on social media content. The research aimed the exploration of the behavior of tourism companies on Timis County, as a pilot study.

The structure of the paper is the following. Next section depicts the literature review on social media importance for tourism sector. Section three describes the methodology used in the pilot study research. Section four presents the results and discusses the main findings of the research. Last section concludes the paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last decade, hospitality and tourism industry manifested a higher interest in the utilization of social media for sharing information, communication, and collaboration, interactivity and transactions (Hays, Page et al, 2013; Osei, Mensah and Amenumey, 2018). These new technologies provide valuable tools for tourism companies, in order to meet the necessary information in real time, and also permit to be more customer-centric focused (Choe, Kim et al, 2017).

Social media represents an innovative technological mediation with tremendous benefits for tourism management and marketing. Tools and platforms used by social media are permanently changing, so for tourism companies are difficult to develop a long-term strategy based on web 2.0 (Munar, 2012).

Tourism companies can promote their products and services through social media according to the brand strategy they have devised (Alonso, Bressan et al, 2013). Also, social media provides tourism companies important advantages in terms of greater value for marketing budgets, reaching a global audience with limited resources (Hua, Ramayah et al, 2017).

Social media has become also a powerful instrument through which tourism companies position their products and services (Alonso, Bressan et al, 2013). The dissemination of information through social media increases public engagement (Nunkoo, Gursoy and Dwivedi, 2020). Nowadays, companies use more often social media tools to boost awareness about their brand and to connect more efficiently and stronger with customers.

Social media and new technologies pioneered new opportunities and challenges for tourism stakeholders as all of them are involved, not only in the production, purchase, but also in the generation of content through brainstorming, criticism, consultancy, proposals, evaluation, and other activities (Bizirgianni and Dionysopoulou, 2013).These platforms not just shift the power of information and recommendations into the hands of consumers, but also foster costumer relationships in the benefit of tourism operators which may collect useful data and have insight data (Buckley, Gretzel et al, 2015).

Moreover, social media provide virtual travel experiences through virtual tours of the tourism destinations, making tourism products more tangible. Thus, the web content needs to present current information, be creative, exciting, and interactive in order to generate sales and revenues.

Social media platforms allow tourists to share not just information but also emotions and experiential moments. Virtual communities are created which further support social interactions. This digitised content created by tourists can be further capitalized by tourism companies transforming them in powerful databases of consumer information.

Tourism industry should capitalize better the continuous information available on social platform as visitors are in permanent search for advices, opinions, exchange of experiences, audio and visual materials (Bizirgianni and Dionysopoulou, 2013). Tourism operators need to be more active in this regard and must engage tourists in multichannel communication and encourage them to speak about their good experiences. This way, tourism companies can exploit experiences and customize them more (Živković, Gajic and Brdar, 2014).

Tourism operators use social media to promote not only among customers, but also among stakeholders who can further influence the choices of other stakeholders with impact on tourist decision making (John, Larke and Kilgour, 2018). According to Hussain, Chen and Nurunnabi (2018), social media is also supporting the sustainable development of regions and might create employments for residents.

Tourism companies should pay a careful attention also to negative effects of social networks. On social media, people make not only positive reviews, but also negative ones and as a consequence, tourism operators should reinforce loyalty and satisfaction of visitors and avoid or even combat criticism and unproven speculation (Alonso, Bressan et al, 2013).

Organizations no longer have ultimate have power over their image. Tourism organizations should develop a more flexible strategy incorporating social media as a marketing tool. This way the brand of a business can be humanised and the engagement increased. Consequently, social media should remain an integrative marketing tool which may generate significant benefits (Hays, Page and Buhalis, 2013). If the destination is novel and thus the decision making is complex, social media has a higher influence on tourists' choice.

III. METHODOLOGY DESCRIPTION

The authors have developed a quantitative research among companies operating in the tourism sector in Timis County, as a pilot study. The aim of

the research was to identify the use of social media platforms by tourism companies as a marketing tool, and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the digital marketing activity carried out by them.

The research tool was the online questionnaire applied between April and May 2021. The respondents provided information on the following issues:

•   official presence on social media platforms;
•   the main social media platforms on which the organizations operate;
•   the information frequency posted on social media platforms;
•   monitoring the opinions of customers/tourists about products and services offered by the organizations;
•   monitoring the number of customers who interact with organizations through specific types of social media platforms;
•   monitoring the level of consumer involvement in terms of social media platforms content;
•   the main reasons why organizations do not use social media platforms;
•   owning a blog of the organization;
•   the update content frequency of the blog;
•   collaborating with bloggers, influencers or brand ambassadors in various digital marketing campaigns;
•   owning a mobile application, as a promotional support or sales platform for certain activities in the business of organizations;
•   respondents' perception of how the role of digital marketing in organizations has changed in the last year (in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic);
•   the digital marketing objectives that organizations focused on during the pandemic.

From a total of 165 questionnaires sent by email, 24 companies operating in the tourism industry (representative accommodation units, travel agencies, tourist information center, tourist guides, NGOs, West Regional Development Agency) participated in the research. The collected data were subsequently centralized and processed, being statistically analyzed.

IV. MAIN FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The majority of respondents (87.5%) mentioned that they have an official presence on a social networking platform.

Table 1. Official social platforms developed by tourism companies

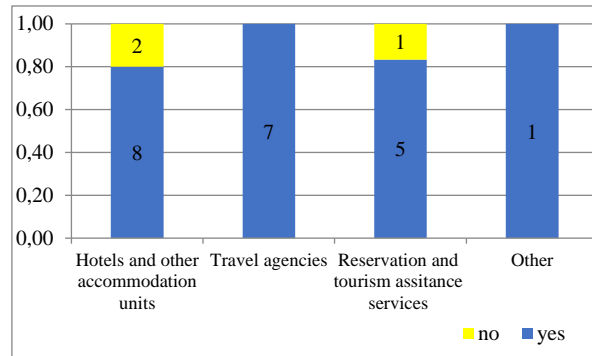| Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	87.5	21
No	12.5	3
Total answers	*100*	*24*

Figure 1 – Social media platforms by type of tourism organization

The most important social media platforms actively used by the respondents are: Facebook (100%), Instagram (52.4%), LinkedIn (14.3%), YouTube (9.5%) and Twitter (4.8%).
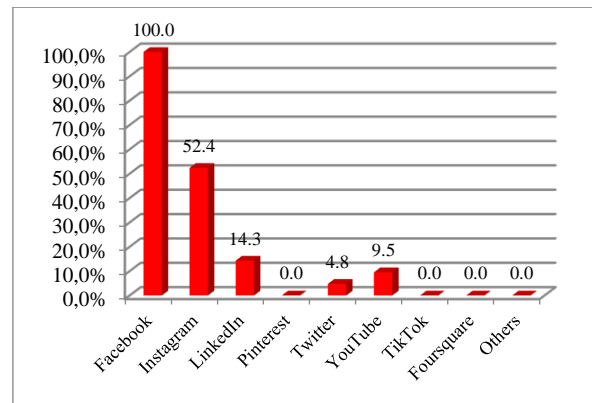

Figure 2 – Preferred social media platforms

The research results show that 57.1% of respondents post 1-2 times a week on social media platforms; 23.8% less than 1-2 times a week; 9.5% post 3-4 times a week and only 4.8% more than 10 times a week.

Table 2. Posts' frequency on social media platforms

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Less than 1-2 times a week	*23.8*	5
1-2 times a week	*57.1*	12
3-4 times a week	*9.5*	2
5-7 times a week	*4.8*	1
8-10 times a week	*0.0*	0
More than 10 times a week	*4.8*	1
Total answers	*100*	*21*

Of the organizations with a presence on social networks, 95.2% said they monitor what travellers say about products / services on social networking sites.

Table 3. The organization monitors travellers' opinions about their products and services

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	*95.2*	20
No	*4.8*	1
Total answers	*100*	*21*

The activity of monitoring the customers' number interacting with the company through specific types of social media platforms (for example, the number of followers, subscribers, page views, etc.) is performed by 90.5% of respondents.

Table 4. The organization monitors the customers' number interacting with the company through social media platforms

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	90.5	19
No	9.5	2
Total answers	*100*	*21*

81% of respondents stated that they monitor the level of consumer involvement in terms of the content on social platforms (e.g., views, re-tweets, rejects, distributions, appreciations, number of comments, etc.).

Table 5. The organization monitors the level of customer involvement in terms of content on social platforms

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	81,0	17
No	19,0	4
Total answers	*100*	*21*

For organizations without a presence on social media platforms, the most common explanation (66.7%) were the costs involved, followed by: it is not necessary, because customers contact them through other tools (33.3%); the organization is too small to justify a website (33.3%); lack of technical expertise (33.3%).
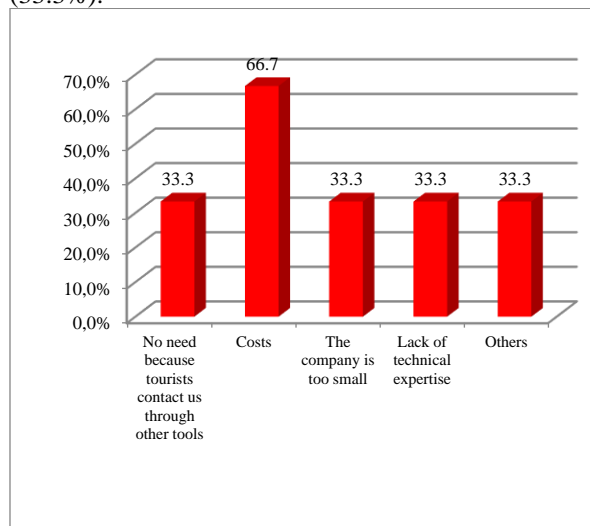

Figure 3 – Reasons for not using social media platforms

The company's blogs are not very common among tour operators in Timiș County. Only 12.5% of respondents mentioned that the organization they represent has a blog.

Table 6. The organization maintains a company blog

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	12.5	3
No	87.5	21
Total answers	*100*	*24*

Depending on the main field of activity, travel agencies and booking and travel assistance services are the sectors with the highest rates of blog adoption, while the respondent hotels do not have a company blog. 66.7% of the companies who have a blog update it less than once a week, while 33.3% post news on the blog 1-2 times a week.

Table 7. Frequency of blog content updates

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Less than 1-2 times a week	66.7	2
1-2 times a week	33.3	1
3-4 times a week	0.0	0
5-6 times a week	0.0	0
More than 6 times a week	0.0	0
Total answers	*100*	*3*

Almost half of the respondents (45.8%) have not yet worked with bloggers, influencers or brand ambassadors, but consider working with them in the future, 37.5% have not worked and do not intend to, and 16.7% worked on digital marketing campaigns or collaborative projects with bloggers, influencers or brand ambassadors.

Table 8. The organization has worked on digital marketing campaigns or collaborative projects with bloggers, influencers or brand ambassadors

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	16.7	4
No, but we think about it	45.8	11
No	37.5	9
Total answers	*100*	*24*

Most respondents (95.8%) do not have a mobile application as a promotional support or sales platform for certain activities in the business.

Table 9. The organization has a mobile application, as a promotional support or sales platform for certain activities in the business

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	4.2	1
No	95.8	23
Total answers	*100*	*24*

Regarding the change in the role of digital marketing during the pandemic, an equal distribution (33.3%) was observed between the response options: it has not change, it registered an increase, it registered a decrease.

Table 10. The role of digital marketing within the organization in the last year (COVID-19 pandemic)

Answer options	Percentage	Frequency
It hasn't changed	33.3	8
It registered a decrease	33.3	8
It registered an increase	33.3	8
Total answers	100	24

The main digital marketing objectives that the responding organizations focused on during the COVID-19 pandemic were: keeping current customers (54.2%), increasing customer awareness of the brand / organization (50%), acquiring new customers (41.7%), building the value of the brand that connects customers (33.3%), improving the return on investment in marketing (16.7%).

Table 11. The digital marketing objectives that the organization focused on during the COVID-19 pandemic

Answer options (multiple choice question)	Percentage	Frequency
Building brand value that connects with customers	33.3	8
Increasing customer awareness of the brand / organization	50.0	12
Acquisition of new customers	41.7	10
Retaining existing customers	54.2	13
Improving Marketing Return on Investment	16.7	4
Other (please specify)	0.0	0
Total answers		24

V. CONCLUSIONS

Tourist operators should focus their attention in providing more functions on social media platforms (i.e., booking, secure payment) to both meet expectations and to gain competitive advantage (John, Lark and Kilgour, 2018). Also, tourism companies need to pay attention to social media platforms as they assist consumer-generated content (CGC), and in order not to undermine their authority.

Since social media ensures a participative environment, visitors can contribute to producing content, not just to interpreting it (Liew, 2014). The social media strategies should focus on enabling consumer-driven decisions, consumer-generated marketing content (Howison, Finger et al, 2015).

Because of the poor strategies in the field of promotion, Romanian tourism destinations are struggling to express its European cultural identity among visitors and travellers. Tourism companies should have a better understanding of how different products and services are used. That's why specialists do not only talk about not only about web 1.0 (web development), web 2.0 (participative web and social networking), but also about web 3.0 (web semantic, web data), web 4.0 (mobile web), and web 5.0 (emotional web).

Also, tourism business should be aware of the necessity of incorporating social media and sites such as TripAdvisor in their business approach as the presence of tourists on these platforms is growing each day. Their travel decisions, acquisitions and planning are directly connected with the social media and TripAdvisor as tourists consider very useful the information disseminated through these sites (Osei, Mensah and Amenumey, 2018).

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