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Present-day topics

DIGITAL WORLD, TOURISTS AND RURAL TOURISM

Abstract

The digital world it is the latest high priority in tourism research nowadays and the social media marketing comes with low costs while reaching millions of future tourists. Even with a low key presence on the social media sites and without sophisticated content a specific region can gain an identity and recognition. Rural tourism operators do not dispose of a great budget allocated for such activities and in many cases they do not offer internet services, but with the help of tourism bloggers and reviews an increase in acknowledgment of the touristic destination is possible. Our present research analyses the advantages offered by the digital world, the inconveniences and with the help of 30 tourist interviews some proposals and appreciations are made.

Key words: digital world, sustainable tourism, electronic world of mouth, social media, rural tourism

1. Introduction

Rural tourism destination image (TDI) represents a great influential criterion in the tourists' decision and the competition that arises between regions is understandable (Cooper et al., 1993; Beerli and Martin, 2004b) as a better image for a destination has stronger probabilities in being chosen. Traditionally the destination image it is projected in the eyes of tourists with the help of brochures, where pictures alongside descriptive texts is inserted, TV spots, television documentaries, books, newspaper articles, school lessons, stories of friends' experiences and nowadays on the internet. We now deal with web 2.0 known as well as social media, and which evolved from web 1.0 when an interaction between users was not available. Chalkiti & Sigala, (2008) emphasize that the present form web 2.0 creates new advantages for the tourism companies that want to expand and share their knowledge with all the parts involved (customers, suppliers, various partners).

Tourism customers interact with different sources of information like: the word of mouth, press reports, blogs, advertising in travel agencies and with which they develop a set of expectations and some beliefs about the destination they intend to visit (Buhalis, 2000). The effects that rise on tourists regarding the tourism destination image are of two kinds emotionally and logical (San Martin, Rodriguez del Bosque, 2008). Several authors argue that one important aspect in tourism management and destination marketing is the creation of a positive image (Konecnik, 2002; Molina, Gómez, & Martín-Consuegra, 2010; Nicoletta, Servidio, 2013).

This paper discusses the impact of a good marketing with the help of the tourism blogs, the challenges that have emerged with the internet era for the tourism entrepreneurs in rural

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tourism. The paper includes a section about on-line platforms and the case study, the analyze of the 30 interviews realized in the Durauregion by using the cross cased analysis.

The conclusions present the arguments in favour of using a media channel, an optimal choice for the future of a rural business as tourists are emotionally influenced by pictures and real presentations of a region.

2. Literature Review

Facebook and other social on-line networks are the platform that millionsof persons use it daily and represent a considerable opportunity for tourism operators on one hand and for tourists on the other hand. According to The ICT Development Index (IDI) provided by the International Communication Union (2013), Romania finds on 55th place considering the international bandwidth, how developed the backbone is andthe broadband infrastructure.The number of internet users at 30 June, 2012 for Romania is approximately 9.6 million users which accounts a 44.1% of total population from which 5.4 million users used Facebook by December 2012 (Internet World Stats). Worldwide the leading social media channel is Facebook with 1.4 billion members(Statistic Brain, 2014) andthisoffers great transfer of information regarding the location preference, tourist behaviour, attitudes and even the group with whom the user shares their experiences.Social media brought meaningful transformation in the amount of information and personal experiences the users choose to share with a broader public.

Buhalis (2003) appreciates as well that the internet through all the multi-media applications offers tourists and destinations new means of communication that have less costs for search and distribution. Destination branding with the help of marketing is what a region/destination needs in order to have a unique identity that differentiates it from others. Skinner (2008) emphasizes that branding a place associates with promotional activities with the help of marketing communications. In order to increase the popularity of a destination the creation of an image represents an important factor(Hsu et al., 2004) and with the digital world the steps to be fulfilled are fewer. Our research is backed up by Reid and Bojanic (2006); Del Rosso, (2005); Hotels, (2005) that recognize the influence of reference groups, persons who have a blagon future clients and their marketing potential for the tourism industry.

Tourism lives through images, photographs, videos etc. and when a story is told about a particular place either with the help of a website or blog the tourist resonates more and finds himself under the influence of what is presented.The analyse of the on-line platforms is considered the top priority in the tourism research nowadays as the effects(Williams, Stewart, Larsen, 2011; Xiang, Gretzel, 2010) that come along are not at all neglected and they can become the engine and important resources for different activities connected to tourism. In general those that receive a great acknowledgement for their personal opinion on a specific region that they have visited, and on which they offer self-made pictures and evaluations of specific accommodation places, restaurants, amusements facilities have an active on-line use on their sites/blogs/Facebook accounts and present e-literacy skills and are not endorsed by a tourism company. They become reliable if they become followed, if their content is honest, their review provides an overall analyse of the destination with pro and cons as this distinguishes them from a marketing campaign or tourism agency. Leisen, (2001) appreciates that tourism destination image forms in time with the help of different pieces of information that are gathered from various sources.

3. Rural tourism and Marketing implications

Rural tourism represents a sustainable development tool for the rural areas and recent researches show an increase in outdoor activities, desire for spending time in a polluted free space, relaxation, socialization/learning, novelty (Nistoreanu et al., 2011; Figueiredo, 2004; Kastenholz, 2010).

However in order to have success with a sustainable marketing strategy there should be a participation of all those involved in the process so that the experience delights the tourists, arouses emotions, makes sense and appeals to the senses and stays in mind long over the actual experience having as well the potential to transform the participants (Kastenholz, Figueiredo, 2010; Mossberg, 2007). For creating a destination image that differentiates the specific region from other competing ones a tourism marketing management model might offer the winning strategy (Vela, 2009). Molina et al. (2010) appreciates that several changes have been made to the type of information a tourist uses, that the behaviour of a consumer of touristic products has evolved and differentiation in the promotion of a rural tourism business is necessary as the number of destinations is higher than it was fifteen years ago. The businesses Bed and Breakfast type that activate in rural tourism do not dispose of internet access or the resources from the urban area. At national level in Romania several projects are on the roll and one of them is "The national program of rural development 2014-2020" that represents a step for a sustainable development as well as the European congress for rural tourism –Eurogites which was organized in 2012 in Piatra Neamt city with the main subject the Innovative tourism- A new life for the rural regions.

4. Case Study

For this particular branch of tourism tourists have the intention to travel to view something familiar, an idyllic image. Several press coverage in national titles have put forward the attention on the rural tourism in Neamt County but tourists devour these days other types of publications (Vacante la tara, Revista Satul, FPTR Voyage Voyage). The number of published publications has decreased while the number of online journals has encountered an ascending path. The recognition of a region comes in time and the identity and the sense of belonging can be evidenced with the help of the testimonials of other tourists. A high proportion of visitors are those who choose the weekend and our study interviewees are couples with age between 20 to 28 and families in their thirties and forties with one child or two.

Research Methodology

Data collection

For our present research we used the interviews of 30 tourists that were in the region Neamt, village Ceahlău during the period of one month 15 January-15 February 2014. The interview questions were designed on existing literature (Quivy, Van Campenhout, 1998). They lasted between 5 to 10 minutes in which the main scope was to discover what on-line services they used and if that were an influence in the choice they made. One of the premises of our research was that we will find non-user of Internet, and which confirmed. We try to answer to the following 3 questions: 1. Do they use other reviews or any kind of social media to inform and take a decision about future destination choice? ; 2. Do they know any tourism bloggers? ; 3. How pertinent is reading a tourism blog and if the information found there are true?.

The total interviews sums 20 questions and was divided in 3 sections: one that referred to their knowledge about internet platforms, the second one collected data about the decision making habits while the third one was designed to learn about demographic information such as age sex, annual income, family status and education.

Research Findings

During the interviews there were taken notes and after that they weretranscribed, checked for clarity and in some cases the key thoughts were summarized. According to the Centerof touristic information “Gheorghe Iacomi”, Piatra Neamt the Durau resort, which is recognized as a holiday destination suitable for rest and treatment of anaemia asthenic neurosis, sums a number of 41 B&B legal facilities in the area. A cross cased analysis was used for our interviews and Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the persons interviewed. Out of 30 persons 14 are male while the rest are female. The descriptive analysis showed that 20% are married and 80% have higher education studies. A great percent of the respondents 83.3% have the annual income under 25000 RON.

Table 1 Demographic profile of respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percent%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	14	46.67
Female	16	53.33
<i>Age</i>		
Under 18	4	13.33
18-30	19	63.33
31-45	7	23.34
<i>Education</i>		
Primary school	2	6.67
High school	4	13.33
Graduate	24	80.00
<i>Annual income</i>		
No income	2	6.67
Under 25000 RON	23	76.67
25000-35000RON	4	13.33
Over 35000RON	1	3.33

Source: Author

The respondents offered several sources of information as the deciding factor in their selection of the destination. There was extracted a number of 6 common motivations: distance and accessibility, landscape, relaxation and socialization, green and eco-activities. A number of 7 tourists read blogs in general, before a hike or day trip to the mountains. For this particular destination 3 tourists reported that they have read several coverage's of various tourism bloggers. A greater number of respondents, 12 affirmed that they read reviews about B&B and they took it in consideration. They interact with other tourists on forums or tourism blogs to comment afterwards about their personal experience. The blogs that offer pictures are the best appreciated as they influence in a higher scale the perceptions about the destination. The relationship between the information used for choosing a destination and selection of the destination can be demonstrated with the responses of our respondents. The frequency in the responses of the interviewed tourists that are influenced by the social media/blogs is a percentage of 16.67%. Such a low degree of the percentage is explained by two motives: a small number of questioned tourists and the fact that a number of 9 persons were in a group trip. A number of 12 persons read blogs and use social media channels for staying update with offers or promotions before taking the decision to choose a destination. In terms of accuracy of the information offered and pertinence of the blogs and social media channels a percentage of 26.67% declare that they find

it true and reliable as there are presented pros and cons when describing a personal trip. The findings support the research of Molina and Esteban(2006) that appreciated the interest and tendency of tourist to resort to impersonal information sources such as internet, guides etc.

Research limitations/implications

The number of respondents is relatively low and the findings concentrate on their answers which makes it difficult to get an in depth analyse of the pheromone social media and its impact of the destination image and selection. Otherwise the research provides data that the attractiveness of a destination can be formed and induced by tourism blogs and social media channels. A further research is needed for different destinations and the present results allow uscoming up with the proposal of taking in consideration the role of tourism business engagement in the on-line content.

6. Conclusions

The possibility of sharing in real-time any tourism experience allows users to stay connected and to create a virtual identity (Munar, 2010). Several authors highlighted that rural operators do not turn that often to the use of on-line promotion channels (Boyne and Hall, 2004) and the low spread in the on-line blogs or social media channels of the region analysed confirm the previous studies. The on-line platforms offer the possibility of improving the image, the impact on decision making process and a particular trust and reputation is created with the help of on-line bloggers. Even if the rural tourism is characterized as a conservative and change resisting (Champion & Hugo, 2004)the use of social media platforms and tourism blogs represents a new form of promotion the tourism which involves very low costs and no burdens for the tourism operators. One of the advantage that social media brings in front is a diminution of the uncertainty and strengthens the desire of changing information while the tourists can have the sense of belonging to a virtual travel community (Gretzel et al., 2006 ; Wang et al., 2002).

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