

## Rethinking Of Experiential Tourism through Social Media: Could Greece Keep Up the Pace?

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### **Abstract**

*The development of social media has been reported to have reshaped the tourism industry, as in general revolutionary information and communication technologies have deeply affected the society and its overall functioning. Facebook and Tripadvisor are two of the applications mostly discussed that do have an important impact on the image of the companies associated with the sector.*

*The contribution of Greek tourism in the country's economy has been highlighted several times over the years. However, not all the regions contribute equally. More specific, coastal areas and islands that represent the core Greek tourist product, sea and sun, are the most popular ones whereas the rest of the Greek territory remains 'unexploited' in tourism terms.*

*Through this study is attempted, two hot issues, such as social media and experiential tourism, to be approached and to conclude in whether a digital investment to promote experiential tourism would be a valuable one to generate tourism flow to sense and feel the taste of Greek tourism reality as an alternative of casual tourism marketing. In order to answer that, relevant literature has been reviewed. The current situation has been described, involving the promotion of Greece as destination and tourism-related enterprises using ICTs and social media. The factors affecting the effectiveness of the investment, like economic circumstances, the geography and culture of the region are also examined.*

**Keywords:** *tourism, social media, tourism planning, e-tourism, experiential tourism.*

JEL Classification: L83, M31

## **Introduction**

The internet is reasonably considered as one of the most important innovations of all time. That is because of the tremendous impact it proved to have not only to business and particular undertakings but also in human nature and everyday life. According to the latest data, internet penetration over the world's population is 42%, with the greatest penetration rates appearing in North America, Australia and Europe (Internetworldstats.com, 2014). According to the same source, by the end of 2013 internet penetration reached 59,9% in Greece. That makes Greece the fourth country in European Union with the lowest penetration percentage, after Romania, Bulgaria and Italy.

Several studies so far, have examined in detail the impact of internet and information and communication technologies (ICTs) over tourism and the corresponding industry. Through the analysis of different aspects with a variety of methods, most of them conclude on a reshaping of the travel industry as a whole that has already occurred.

The application of ICTs on the tourism industry, called e-tourism by Buhalis & Jun (2011) raised quickly awareness of the scientific community. More important, Web 2.0 became a hot issue over the past few years. According to Turban et al. (2008), the term represents "the second generation of internet-based services that let people collaborate and share information online in perceived new ways". Some of the most important Web 2.0 tools include RSS (Really Simple Syndication), podcasting, vodcasting, widgets, facilities to share, tag and classify information, mashup, data embedding systems and webcast (Haro de Rosario, Gálvez Rodríguez & Caba Pérez, 2013). The vast majority of the tools above appear to be present in most social media. Social media on the other hand are found to be defined in many ways. However, the common denominator of the definitions given is that they refer to platforms friendly for the public to use in order to share all kinds of data and information and encourage interaction. Social media include blogs, wikis, media sharing platforms like Youtube and Slideshare, social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn and Twitter, which actually consists a category by itself (Haro de Rosario, Gálvez Rodríguez & Caba Pérez, 2013, Leung et al, 2013).

Tourism industry's highly service-based nature is the reason why the applicability of Web 2.0 is so wide. Travel plans, destinations, hotels, tourist guides, restaurants, sights and events transform into experiences, which can be shared via text, photos and videos. More important, all of the above have the power and attraction to become popular issues of discussion over social networks (Miguéns, Baggio & Costa, 2008). Of course, it didn't take much time until the opportunity given to be exploited by marketing specialists. Marketing practices in tourism and hospitality are strongly correlated with social media and emerging technologies (Iancu, Popescu, Popescu & Vasile, 2013), since organized crowds are there easy to be found and targeted. However, what seems to attract more attention lately is the rising power of users in social media campaigns (Ketter & Avraham, 2012).

On the other hand, though, how can social media interact as well as collaborate with creating the will to a potential tourist to visit a destination. How can experiential tourism be presented in social media and create a pre-journey experience to be realised into actual visiting of the destination? O'Dell (2007) indicates that in

postmodern society, tourists are no longer mere receivers, observers, or interpreters of the trip, instead, they are active experientialists, and may even assume the role of meaningful creators and actors. Thus, tourism professionals should conduct their observations at tourist sites, "be there" and be close to tourists in order to participate in activities rather than observing from a distance in order to create a quality and sustainable experiential tourism product (Sternberg, 1997).

A destination is depicted as an amalgam of tourist products, offering an integrated experience to consumers (Buhalis, 2000), and is conceptualized as "a package of tourism facilities and services, which like any other consumer product, is composed of a number of multi-dimensional attributes" (Hu & Ritchie, 1993, p. 26). Therefore in this latter, Greek tourism professionals should focus and create a different and diverse product offering the potential visitor a variety of experiences to live during their stay which are authentic and targeted and not to be similar with mass tourism practices that are concerned only on how to extract currency from the visitor and not create an add-on experience that eventually could create sustainable and quality tourism for Greece.

### **An insight into social media**

While the linear model of communication in place marketing campaigns starts to become outdated, a many-to-many communication model has already been formed (Zouganeli, Trihas & Antonaki, 2011). The linear model of communication has three core components: the source, the message and the receiver. Those are characterized by a quite simple, one-way interconnection. So, the source, which is either a tourism business or a government tourism related unit, delivers the message, which is actually its selling proposition, to the receiver, the customer to be. Or at least that was the traditional process to market a place, as a tourism destination, which is true that has degraded due to the appearance and clear domination of social media (Ketter & Avraham, 2012).

The many-to-many model of communication previously mentioned refers to the ability given by social media to each user to interact one another, by sharing experiences via text, photos and videos. As a result, users transform from passive recipients to active sources of information. The interesting part of the story though is that information shared by consumers, is perceived in the minds of other potential consumers as real and the whole process is characterized by transparency (Haro de Rosario, Gálvez Rodríguez & Caba Pérez, 2013).

The basic principal that actually defines the many-to-many model of communication is the one of User Generated Content (UGC). As explained by O'Reilly (2005), the term refers to the ability of users not only to produce their own content but also to consume content that other users have created. The bidirectional nature of the model under discussion can be clearly understood when referring to the most popular UGC application, Tripadvisor. Tripadvisor is "a website based on the idea that travelers rely on other travelers' reviews to plan their trips, or at least can be satisfactorily helped in their decisions by them" (Miguéns, Baggio & Costa, 2008). More specific, Tripadvisor attempts to organize the so-called electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM), which is also generated on Twitter (Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013), in a user friendly platform.

Considering all the above, the tremendous change in the tourism and hospitality arena is a solid phenomenon that needs to be addressed by enterprises in the sector through the adoption of social media in their business strategies (Gretzel, Sigala & Christou, 2012). Highlighting everything presented until that point, it has been reported that trust in a social media brand is strongly engaged with brand loyalty (Christou, 2015) the endlessly pursuing aspect of all marketers.

As far as the extent of the exploitation of social media concerns, research shows that tourism related enterprises and corresponding governmental units do not take full advantage of its capabilities. More specific, Haro de Rosario's (2013) results indicate limited development of social media and web 2.0 tools in top hotel chains. Most of them struggled to assure visibility, by creating a Facebook page or opening a Twitter account but didn't take it one step further and failed to build trust and credibility. That happened since, even though people did criticize the hotels and the services offered, there was no one there to reply and present the administration's point of view (Buhalis and Mamalakis, 2015).

Regarding European National Organizations (NTOs) and the way they use Facebook as a representative social media example, Zouganeli et al. (2011) noticed that only a little more than half of them had created a Facebook page by the time the study took place. Also, those who did, did not fully employed their potential under a structured social media campaign. As expected, the limited interaction with the public minimized the number of fans of the page and again failed to serve the reason of its existence.

In general, communication strategies involving social media are relatively inexpensive and time-effective as marketing efforts, while the interaction enables useful feedback to reach the business (Ketter & Avraham, 2012). Additionally, Sigala (2011) underlines the vulnerability of tourism as an industry and suggests extended but careful use of social media in crisis management.

A study conducted by Roy, Maxwell & Carson (2014), monitoring the behaviors related to the subject examined of four small-medium enterprises in central Arkansas concludes that the four main aspects that influence social media usage are ease of use, affordability and availability of time to implement or technical support. It is also underlined the preference of those hospitality and tourism-related SMEs to social media that are already familiar to the public.

### **An insight into experiential tourism**

In the age of postmodernity, the experiences of consumers play an increasingly important role in economic and social life. It is claimed that we are witnessing the emergence of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Tourism is surely one of the pioneer examples of the experience economy. From the 1970s onwards the tourist experience has become one of the most popular academic topics, reflected in the constant growth of the social science literature on the tourist experience during the last three decades (Chang et al, 2014). With the changing compositions of tourists, the contents of tourism experiences change. Larsen and Mossberg (2007) indicate that experiences are subjective and personalized processes, and are related to social cultures and varied systems. Therefore, studies of tourist experiences should be based on flexible and diverse multi-discipline perspectives, such as psychology, sociology,

anthropology, or marketing, and could even be interdisciplinary (Prebensen, 2015).

Therefore and analysing the above mentioned, the concrete approaches to the tourist experience vary. Firstly, the tourist experience is studied from a phenomenological approach, which focuses on the subjective experience from the common-sense standpoint of the tourists (Ryan, 1997a). Secondly, the tourist experience is treated from a Durkeimian approach and is equated to a quasi-religious, pilgrimage-like and sacred journey (Hennig, 2002) which offers opportunities of escape from daily drudgery, constraints, anomies, and profane responsibilities (Dann, 1977) and of experiencing freedom (Gottlieb, 1982), authenticity (Redfoot, 1984), novelty and change (Cohen, 1979), the exotic (Wang, 2000), playful childishness (Dann, 1977), 'flow' (Mitchell, 1983), meanings (Cohen, 1979), identity (Lanfant et al., 1995) and myth-making (Selwyn, 1996), and so on. Thirdly, the tourist experience, as a subjective psychological process, is treated as the object that can be studied in positivist methods, as exemplified in scientific experiments and other quantitative methods (Pearce, 1982). Fourthly, there is a critical approach that regards the tourist experience as an institutional pleasure-seeking activity, which unconsciously contributes to the maintenance of the status quo. Thus, just like religion is regarded by Marx as the opiate of the masses, the tourist experience is similarly treated as the opiate of modern tourists (Van, 1980). Fifthly, the tourist experience is essentially treated as a particular type of gaze which incorporates the powers of institutions of tourism industry and mass media and which is trained and shaped by cultures, values and dominant discourses such as romanticism (Urry, 1990).

## **Methodology**

The main aim of the study is to decide whether a digital investment concerning social media in tourism sector by promoting experiential tourism would be applicable, suitable and useful for Greece. In order to reach a decision, tourism as an industry and the Greek tourism product are examined. Special attention is given to the fluctuation of numbers related to the attractiveness of the country's tourism product and destinations. The impact of the economic crisis is also highlighted.

The main part of the study focuses on how the National Tourism Organization, the Ministry of Tourism and tourism-related enterprises of the region use social media and whether they are promoting experiential tourism. The extent of usage and promotion is measured through data collected from Tripadvisor, Facebook and official national tourism websites.

The information extracted through the analysis is combined with knowledge gained after careful examination of studies focusing on the communication strategies formed mostly from government agencies in order to boost Thessaly's tourism potential. Last are discussed the political, economical, social and technological circumstances in Greece, that could affect the undertaking.

After considering the above mentioned information, the study concludes in a proposition over the strategy that needs to be embedded, the possible barriers towards its accomplishment and the areas that should be further clarified before taking action.

## **Discussion**

Greece is one of the most popular destinations in the Mediterranean, while tourism is considered in general a major financial activity. According to the Greek Tourism Confederation (SETE, 2013), Greek Tourism contributed in 2012 to the country's GPA about 16,4%. Its contribution to employment was accounted for 18,3%. More specific, the International Tourism Receipts, the same year, reached 10 billion Euros.

Due to the socioeconomic and political crisis Greece has undergone since 2009, Greek tourism was characterized by a general contraction in terms of both arrivals and receipts. However, corresponding data from the last two years show a clear tendency for the numbers to be restored (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2014). Based on that fact, it is believed that tourism might be the driving force behind the country's economic recovery (Kapiki, 2012).

As far as setting policies concerns, the authority in charge is, as expected the Ministry of Tourism. Supervised by the Ministry of Tourism, the Greek National Tourism Organization is basically responsible in taking theory into action or simply applying the policies set by the government. Of course, everything mentioned above, is surrounded by a European framework that basically allows interaction and encourages consumption of the within EU borders tourism product.

Acknowledging though the great effect a successful regional policy might have in boosting local tourism, regions' and prefectures' authorities do try to form specialized policies for the corresponding areas they serve. It is attempted for these policies to be custom-made and as a result, to rely on the specific and unique characteristics of the region.

Among Greece's competitive advantages are its rich cultural legacy, natural beauty and geographic diversity (Investingreece.gov.gr, 2015). However, what need to be considered are the not so favorable aspects of Greek tourism. The geography of Greek tourism is one of those. It refers to the dissimilar distribution of tourists' visits. In particular, tourists prefer to visit coastal areas and islands. The fact of their concentration in such geographic regions can be explained through the establishment of Greece over the years as a destination, where visitors can enjoy sun and sea.

Narrowing the selling proposition of the country in that diptych is actually the reason why tourism appears to have intense seasonality. The tourism product selected to be the flagship of Greek tourism can be offered only during the summer. Obviously, that fact generates a series of issues along with little exploitation of the already existing infrastructure and increased cost of use (Polyzos & Saratsis, 2013).

Larsen (2007) suggests that part of tourist experience expectations is related to personal traits and states, and part is associated with personal expectations for future trips. Tourists' expectations for future trips are usually related to their imagery, which are their expectations for and impressions of the destination, which will influence their tourism considerations and cognition (Sheng and Chen, 2013, Birgit, 2001). When the locations are special or involve some activities, tourists' imagery would be more significant. They can be associated with tourists' expectations of future trips and become the

main parts of tourist experience expectations. Therefore, the combination of the feelings that Greece creates to visitors and non-visitors with the experiential nature of the new tourism product that has to be offered, should establish Greece in the spot of world tourism map, offering a unique opportunity to captivate either to visitors or the tourism professionals.

Over the past decade Greek tourism-related authorities, especially the Greek National Tourism Organization, have recognized the importance of promoting Greece as a destination through social media. More specific, since 2010, when the corresponding strategy was approved and applied in a three year basis, it was clearly stated in several reports that more than 80% of the global community uses internet to decide and plan vacations. Social media enhance the experience, while they play a major role in cultivating emotions of content before, during and after the trip is taken. Furthermore, in order for the two core tourist audiences to be approached, British and Germans, those channels need to be exploited to the fullest (*Promotion Strategy from the Greek National Tourism Organization for the years 2014-2015-2016*, 2013).

Larsen (2007) indicated the interactive nature of tourist experiences, and suggested that interactions between tourists and travel systems include three stages:

- 1 before the trip;
- 2 processes during the trip; and
- 3 after the trip.

In the planning stage before the trip, tourists anticipate possible events through expectations, while during the processes tourists will have different perceptions of events, and after the trip they will have memories. These three factors (expectations, perceptions, and memories) connect the entire processes of the trip, which then creates the tourist experience, and may even influence other tourists' expectations for the same or different types of trips.

Besides the Greek National Tourism Organization's website, which was redesigned in 2012 but is strictly informational and supervised by the corresponding Ministry, in 2014 the campaign "Greece: All time classic" was launched. As a result, two new websites were created: "Visit Greece" and "Discover Greece".

"Visit Greece" website (Visit Greece | The Official website of the Greek Tourism Organisation, 2015) aims to answer potential tourists why to choose Greece as a destination to spend their vacations. Though it is supported by only two languages, Greek and English, it has a modern design and is linked with several social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, Foursquare, Pinterest, Google plus and Youtube. Most of the information found there is also shared to the corresponding blog. Of course, the website visitor has the opportunity to contact the administrators via email.

"Discover Greece" website (Discover Greece, 2015) is an even more useful and attractive tool in the hands of the potential tourists. Not only it provides information about the destination, but also through its contemporary design, helps the visitor to be, to plan the trip to Greece. The website is an initiative of the NGO "Marketing Greece", which only purpose is to promote the Greek tourism product. The website is supported in five languages, Greek, English, German,

French and Russian. As expected, it is linked with Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Google plus, Pinterest and Instagram. What is distinctive about it is the opportunity given to the visitors to create the so-called "lovelist". Lovelist is a tool embedded into the website and practically aims to bond the potential tourist with Greece as a destination. Additionally, instead of simply contact the administrators, the website encourages its visitors to both share their opinion and send a query if needed. As in the case of "Visit Greece" website, this one too appears to have a blog that enables people to publish their own stories.

The overall evaluation of experience, often measured as overall satisfaction, is described as residing in customers' perceptions of the performance of the product and service (Oliver, 1997). Tourism offers a wide forum for satisfaction of quite a number of human needs: relaxation and cure, feeling togetherness, social acceptance, prestige, learning, self-realization in various forms, and esthetic impressions (Larsen, 2007, Aho, 2001). However, the general nature of touristic experiences has been dealt relatively little. These experiences may have various dominant contents: for example amusement, emotions, learning, relaxation, and various types of activities. It is useful to distinguish between essential core contents of touristic experiences (Quan and Wang, 2004). Four essential cores are suggested here and should be implemented by Greek tourism professionals:

- 1 Getting emotionally effected, i.e. some emotional impression felt. This core contents is called emotional experiences.
- 2 Getting informed, i.e. some new intellectual impression or learning based on the information offered to the subject by the experience. This core type covers informative experiences.
- 3 Getting practiced, i.e. increase in some capability (like skills in language, tennis or mountaineering) of the subject. This core covers practice experiences.
- 4 Getting transformed, i.e. at least a rather permanent change in the state of mind or body or the way of life of the subject. This core covers transformation experiences (Larsen, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

When examining a potential digital investment in any given sector, one of the first aspects that need to be considered is whether the attempt will reach the desirable audience. In the case discussed, despite the low internet penetration in Greece, the one of the target audiences, mostly developed European countries, is impressively high. In combination with the widespread phenomenon of social media interaction, it appears that the first precondition is met.

The reshaping of the travel industry has already taken place. As a result, an adjustment of both the authorities and the enterprises to the existing circumstances is mandatory. More specific, obsolete models of communication should be abandoned and replaced by new ones. The extent of the need of change in marketing and communication models is quite similar with the one of enriching the Greek tourism product with alternative tourism forms. As the informational model weakens, stimulus should be given for experience exchange. After all, demand does not only refer to the service during the trip, but expands in both periods before and after it.

For the benefits of a digital investment to be maximized, collaboration between interested parties is crucial. Moreover,



authorities and enterprises should be aligned as far as the marketing strategy concerns. In order for such a relation to be formed, authorities need to be respected and productive, while enterprises should be reliable and cooperative.

The electronic Word-of-Mouth may have both positive and negative consequences for an enterprise or a destination. However, negative ones can be minimized when being ready to face them, while positive ones, if exploited properly, can trigger a chain reaction effect. It is true, that tourists will share their travel experiences online anyway, and either authorities or enterprises are present or not. When present though and having a quick and responsible response, there is no case of loss, only gain.

Just presence in social media platforms does not guarantee a beneficial overcome. What needs to be assured is enduring and methodical engagement. It is all about an endless pursuit of earning good critics and bending the bad ones. That is why structured social media campaigns basically orchestrated by NTOs are suggested. Among their essential characteristics belong the ability to manage a crisis and to give incentives not only to tourist but also to locals, to embrace the undertaking. As far as small-medium enterprises concerns, where ease of use, affordability, availability of time and technical support are the criteria in choosing in which medium to be promoted, it would be wise to concentrate on one or two social media platforms for promotion.

In addition to the facts presented above, the political, economical, social and technological circumstances in Greece favor a digital investment in the tourism sector. Political and economical instability pushes government to adopt cost-effective solutions in sectors able to show results relatively quickly and drive Greece towards development. On the other hand, due to their reduced income, most people spend much more time at home surfing on the internet and pursuing contact through social media. Of course, smartphones, 3G and 4G technologies and VDSL internet that became exceptionally famous the last few years, made remote contact extremely easier.

Therefore, experiential tourism should be transmitted through social media. Participants should be encouraged to use geolocation tools, create augmented reality, play internet games, create quizzes, write guide books, blogs, articles, and stories, create postcards, photos, videos, travel and shopping plans. Emotions play an important role in most of the studied campaigns. According to Kiralova and Pavliceka (2014), they should be used especially: (1) to strengthen the romantic factor of the destination; (2) to make visitors love the destination; (3) to make visitors need the destination; (4) increase holiday bookings. Moreover, emotions are to be connected to destinations by: (1) stories; (2) rendezvous; (3) romance; (4) customized, cute characters (avatars); (5) positive and negative referrals; (6) handing over the official tourist board channel to public; (7) helping visitors to meet real destinations' residents. The benefits for the destinations can be summed up as follows, as suggested by Kiralova and Pavliceka (2014: (1) ROI; (2) increase of the number of visitors; (3) increase of positive awareness; (4) increase of destination preference; (5) awards; (6) publicity; (7) rise of website hits; (8) increase of number of website and Facebook referrals; (9) increase of number of Facebook fans; (10) user generated content; (11) acquisition of new ambassadors for the destination; (12) public relations.

Greece's great tourism potential is ready to be exploited. A digital investment might lead the region to transform into an attractive destination. Inevitably, tourism would contribute even more to the region's economy. In order for this to happen, authorities' and enterprises' attempts should be coordinated. Passing from theory to application though, will highlight the importance of properly educated personnel to manage the campaign. Last, employees in the tourism sector should understand and value the investment in order to promote and support it.

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