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The use of social media in destination marketing: An exploratory study

Abstract

Social media provides customers and businesses of modern times with an unprecedented growth in ways of communication and interaction. Tourism organisations can benefit from the limitless opportunities offered by social media and ideally, evolve their relationship with their customers into a networked process of innovation. While there is a growing number of social media studies in the context of tourism, few researches have addressed the application of social media by tourism providers. Thus, this study employed an exploratory research design aimed at establishing a detailed understanding of current use of social media among National Tourism Organizations (NTOs) of the world's 193 countries. To this end, data mining was used to identify the social media applications and types that are used by NTOs, and it was followed by content analysis, to investigate NTOs' strategic use of social media. The findings of this study suggest that many NTOs are still not aware of potential and opportunities offered by social media and for those with social media presence, there is a great room for improvement in strategic use of social media. This study contributes to the existing body of literature by providing an understanding of use of social media in destination marketing. The study also offers some interesting insights for tourism marketers.

Key words: destination marketing; NTOs; online tourism domain; social media; tourism innovation.

Introduction

Tourism industry has experienced a continuous and rapid growth during the last six decades, making it one of the leading industries in the world (UNWTO, 2013; WTTC, 2013). In the meantime, the advent of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in general and Internet technology in particular have revolutionized tourism industry in the last three decades (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Internet technology is used by tourism providers to gain and sustain competitiveness in this highly competitive industry. More specifically, social media which is labeled the “modus operandi of the 21st century” (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012, p. 193) is believed to have a tremendous influence on travel industry (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2011; Hays, Page & Buhalis, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social media builds on the technological foundation of Web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and provides travelers of modern times with an unprecedented growth in ways of communication and interaction. Facebook, which is the dominant social networking platform in the world (Claussen, Kretschmer & Mayrhofer,

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2013) can be used to illustrate the massive influence of social media on travel industry. Travel is a big part of Facebook members' conversations as 42% of users share the information about where they travel, 60% consider online opinions into their travel decisions while 83% trust the recommendations of their families and friends (Costin, 2013).

Social media has transformed the customers from passive receivers of company's messages to active creators that easily contribute their creations to the internet (Hays *et al.*, 2013). As a result, as social media amplifies the power of users by empowering them, the authority of marketers and institutions falls. Further, it is suggested that the era of social media has shifted the level of participation and transparency (Hvass & Munar, 2012) and is reshaping the ways in which communication and interaction with customers take place (Qualman, 2012). Therefore, the customer-interactive nature of tourism industry lead to the expectation that tourism providers utilize the opportunities offered by social media.

Although the study of social media in tourism context is a growing area of interest among researchers, there are few researches in the specific field of use of social media by tourism organizations. Thus, there exists little understanding of the social media strategies that tourism organizations are deploying and the efficacy of those strategies. For example, in a meta-analysis study by Wilson, Gosling and Graham (2012), in which the authors analyzed 412 relevant academic papers, five broad categories of Facebook research in social sciences were identified. Their findings reveal that a major number of the articles concerned the descriptive analysis of users. Hence, it is suggested that the knowledge base mainly focuses on the psychological aspect of social media and less on the use of social media by the businesses. In an attempt to fill this gap, this exploratory study aims at establishing a detailed understanding of use of social media in tourism context which is considered as one of the largest businesses in the world. The subjects of study are National Tourism Organizations (NTOs) which manage tourism in a national level. In addition, the constant and rapid evolvement of social media creates a necessity to keep the literature on the subject up-to-date on a continuous basis.

To achieve the research objective, this study will first critically review the literature of social media in a tourism context. The literature review will provide the foundation for the study by identifying the current state of academic literature on the subject. Then, in the methodology part, the design of the study which relies on data mining and content analysis will be elaborated. The next section will be devoted to presenting findings and discussing the results. Finally, the conclusion part will discuss the implications for NTOs while identifying the limitations of the study and suggesting further research on the subject.

Literature review

Different terms are associated with social media and are interchangeably used in literature. Social software (e.g. Richter & Koch, 2007), User-Generated Content (e.g. Stankov, 2010), Consumer-Generated Media (e.g. Gretzel, 2006) and Web 2.0 (e.g. Constantinides, 2009) are among those terms. Thus, it seems that the current and constantly evolving phenomenon of social media continues to evade a universally accepted definition. However, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that understanding the concepts of Web 2.0 and User-Generated Content is the key to understand social media. These authors consider social media as a set of Internet-based applications that utilize Web 2.0 as its ideological and

technological platform for evolution and that which enable users to create and exchange User-Generated Content. In a general sense, social media refers to internet applications such as Facebook and Twitter that allow their users to create, share and consume Consumer-Generated content (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012). According to Tussyadiah and Zach (2013), social media is now the normal way for the new generation of consumers to search and share information while review and experience with others.

Social media typology

Since the advent of social media, many researchers have attempted to identify and classify its different types (Constantinides, 2009; Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Fotis, Rossides & Buhalis, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; W. Kim, Jeong & Lee, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Safko, 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), indicating an academic disagreement over social media taxonomy.

Among these attempts, Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) typology has received special recognition among the researchers in the field of social media (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012; Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012). The systemic classification of their research is based on a set of social media related theoretical frameworks including media research (social presence and media-richness) and social processes (self-presentation and self-disclosure). The authors argue that these theories build the foundation of social media. By combining the dimensions of media and social processes, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) propose a 3 x 2 scheme that classifies social media according to their level of self-presentation/self-disclosure (low and high) and their level of social presence/media richness (low, medium, high). Thus, the categories include six types of social media including blogs, social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life), collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), content communities (e.g. YouTube) and virtual game networks (e.g. World of Warcraft). Still, this systemic taxonomy neglects some types of social media such as microblogging (e.g. Twitter).

Table 1 was developed to address this issue by offering an exhaustive typology of social media for the purpose of this study. The categories were chosen from the empirical studies of Safko (2012) and Fulkerson (2010) and customer-based categorization of social media by Overdrive Interactive (2013) which is a leading online marketing strategy provider. Table 1 shows the categories of social media, defines them briefly and provides one example for each category. It should be noted that the categories of this table are not mutually exclusive as each social media application can fall into more than one category.

Table 1
Social media types

Social media category	Description	Example
Social Networks	Focuses on building relationships among people with similar interests and activities.	Facebook
International Social Networks	This type of social media site is growing in popularity as the world wide web seeks to become more personal.	VK
Social Travel Networks	Allows travellers to exchange tips with each other before, during and after the trip.	Tripadvisor
Private Social Networks	Allows users to create their own private social networks.	Ning
Professional Social Networks	This type of social media site enables business professionals to recommend one another, share information about industry-related events, post resumes, and other features.	Linkedin

Table 1 Continued

Social media category	Description	Example
Social Recruiting	The process of sourcing or recruiting candidates through the use of social platforms as promotional and/or advertising channels, or Talent databases using search solutions by employers and recruiters.	Indeed
Blogging	Discussion or informational sites published on the World Wide Web.	Tumblr
Microblogging	Differs from traditional blogging as the content is delivered in short bursts of information.	Twitter
Blog Networks	Blog networks are usually a large collection of blogs. Many blog networks provide exclusive content and require approval for bloggers to join, which gives those who are accepted a certain level of prestige.	Gawker
Blogging Communities	Broader than niche communities and not exclusive like blog networks, blogging communities encourage bloggers to share and interact with one another as well as create regular blog posts.	BlogHer (continued)
Comment Communities	Blog comments that have hopped aboard the social media bandwagon to create their own domain of communities.	Disqus
Lifecasting	Continual broadcast of events in a person's life through digital media.	Livestream
Podcasting	Social networks that help connect podcasters, advertisers, and listeners.	iTunes
Social Music Networks	Allows users to listen and share music with others.	Spotify
Photo Sharing	Users can upload and comment on photos.	Pinterest
Video Sharing	Users can upload and comment on videos.	YouTube
Document sharing	Users can upload and share documents.	Scribd
Virtual Worlds	Computer-based simulated environment where the users take the form of avatars visible to others.	Active Worlds
Social Search	Some search engines have evolved beyond providing search results into to a social media communities where users can create profiles and interact.	Google blog search
Social Bookmarking & Sharing/Aggregators	Allows users to share, organise, and search bookmarks of web resources for easy access.	Digg
RSS	An acronym for Rich Site Summary. Tools in this category automatically feed you current content from the websites that are most critical to your business needs.	Atom
Social Q&A	Users can submit or answer questions.	WikiAnswers
Wikis/Content-driven Communities	Usually web applications which allow people to add, modify, or delete content in collaboration with others.	Wikipedia
Niche Communities	Niche networking has grown beyond the message boards of old into full-fledged communities.	Car Community
Product/Company Reviews	Allows reviews to be posted about businesses, products, or services.	Yelp
Social Commerce	Allows social interaction and user contributions to assist in the online buying and selling of products and services.	Groupon
E-Commerce Platforms	Enables individuals and businesses to create online stores.	Shopify
Management & Measurement	Provides social media marketing tools and analytics.	SocialEye
Productivity Applications	A catch-all category, they enhance business productivity in one way or another.	Google Docs
Mobile	The intersection of mobile communications and social media including tools that make mobile phones more powerful business allies.	airG
Interpersonal	Tools that facilitate people-to-people communication and collaboration.	Skype
Other social media sites	Social media sites that defy definitions.	Squidoo

Sources: Fulkerson (2010), Safko (2012), OverdriveInteractive (2013).

Social media and tourism

Tourism literature was quick to respond to the technological progress brought by Web 2.0 by coming up with the term Travel 2.0. The term was first coined by Philip C. Wolf (president and CEO of a leading consultancy tourism firm named PhoCusWright) in 2006. According to him, Travel 1.0 which started in 1995, refers to the adoption of internet in travel context and was dominated by price as travelers were mainly concerned about finding the cheapest travel. Travel 2.0 however, is not only about finding the cheapest trip but the perfect trip (Wolf, 2006). Conrady (2007) summarizes the Travel 2.0 definition by suggesting that it consists of five domains, namely transparency, collaboration, better basics, speed and predictability. Overall, Travel 2.0 is the tourism industry's collective realization of Web 2.0 which refers to a cultural travel change (Miguéns, Baggio & Costa, 2008, p. 2) and includes the utilization of various advanced technological applications like social media in travel context (Ling, 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

As in the case of a more general challenge of marketers and Web 2.0, in Travel 2.0 era, tourism providers are no longer armed with full control over their respective destination images (Hays *et al.*, 2013). According to Tussyadiah and Zach (2013), today's typical tourist not only uses the information provided by DMOs but also have access to a variety of opinion-rich resources such as different social media applications. Using social media, customers can directly communicate with tourism organizations while being able to create other domains of conversations outside the control of tourism providers. Thus, social media enables customers to be active parties in supplying and circulating of the information which in turn can significantly influence the success or failure of tourism organizations (Tussyadiah & Zach, 2013).

Destination marketers need to understand why and how travelers participate in social media to be able to leverage its power. According to Chung and Buhalis (2008), functional benefits including the ability to quickly and easily find the information and the ability to share experiences are the most important benefits perceived by users for participation in online communities. The authors name socio-psychological and hedonic benefits as the other important factors in this context. Similarly, using a quantitative approach with Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Enter and Michopoulou (2013) found that information search, trust and sharing the travel experience affect tourists' behavioral intention to use Facebook as the leading social networking site. In addition, Fotis *et al.* (2010) identify two main reasons for the ever-increasing popularity of social media among travelers. First, the experiential nature of tourism product enables potential tourists to rely on shared experiences available on social media in their decision making process. Interestingly, the information provided in online communities can be perceived by some customers as similar to the information they receive from family members, friends or "like-minded souls" (Fotis *et al.*, 2010; Kim, 2000). Second, according to Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica and O'Leary (2006) social media permits travelers to be storytellers on a '24/7' basis and storytelling in turn enhances the sense of belonging to the online community.

Travelers are increasingly using technological applications in all phases of their trip (Gretzel, Fesenmaier & O'Leary, 2006). Scrutinizing the use social media by travelers among the three stages of trip (i.e. before, during and after the travel), Fotis *et al.* (2012) argue that social media is mainly used in after-the-trip phase with the purpose of sharing experience with other travelers or friends. Furthermore,

before the trip social media is principally used for information search about where to go and during the trip it is mainly used to stay connected with friends (Fotis *et al.*, 2012).

On the supplier side, tourism providers' primary purpose to use social media is to convey a precise flavor of destination to potential visitors (Ružić & Biloš, 2010) while tackling the problem of funding can be viewed as one of the main perceived benefits of using social media by them. According to Hays *et al.* (2013), in response to budget cuts, tourism providers turn to social media as a low cost solution which provides them with global reach (Hays *et al.*, 2013). NTOs and more locally organized DMOs that use social media can add value to their destination brands by providing customers with accurate information, directly interacting with them and timely responding to their concerns and queries (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012). In essence, social media provides tourism organizations with countless opportunities which fully harnessed, can evolve the relationship between tourism providers and travelers into a "networked process of innovation and social production" (Tussyadiah & Zach, 2013, p. 244). However, as noted by Gretzel *et al.* (2006), the decision regarding utilizing social media by tourism providers must be informed and accompanied by commitment to learn and continuous change using proactive approaches.

Overall, the literature review attempted to identify the state of current literature on the subject by investigating the concept of social media, offering a social media typology, and discussing the relationship between social media and tourism, with the purpose of providing the necessary foundation for the study.

Research design and methodology

This study seeks to understand the extent to which NTOs are using social media. Thus, the nature of the research is exploratory with an inductive approach. The methodology of this research followed a two-pronged approach: firstly, a data mining exercise was applied with the purpose of identifying the official presence of NTOs in social media and secondly, content analysis was utilized to reach an understanding of the extent to which NTOs are utilizing social media.

The first step was to identify the official websites of the NTOs and subsequently finding their social media presence based on the hyperlinks provided in the websites. To this end, using a data mining approach, a set of keywords were defined in their combination with the destinations' names to query to a search engine. The defined keywords were, "National tourism organization", "Official tourism board", "official tourism organization" and "National tourism board". In addition, a list of countries in the world was obtained from United Nations member states directory (UN, 2014). According to this list, as of March, 2014 there are 193 countries that are members of United Nations General Assembly. Further, Google search service was the search engine used in this study. Google was selected as it is the most popular search engine throughout the World Wide Web (Alexa.com, 2014) and provides the state-of-art search technology for its users (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Hence, to identify the official national tourism boards' websites, the abovementioned keywords followed by the name of the countries (e.g. "National tourism board Germany") were entered in Google search to obtain the results. In the next step, the top 10 search results were analyzed for each destination to find the websites of tourism boards and ensuring that the website officially represents the NTO. After finding the official websites, the pages were scrutinized to spot the hyperlinks to social media outlets (e.g.

Facebook) used by NTOs. Eventually, the links were stored in a Microsoft Excel 2013 file with the purpose of categorizing data in understandable and meaningful ways. Data collection took place from 1 March, 2014 to 10 March, 2014.

The analysis was then used to determine the dominant social media platform used by NTOs. The results suggested that Facebook, the leading social networking site in the world (Claussen *et al.*, 2013), is the NTOs favorite platform in social media. Hence, the coding manual of this study (see Table 2) was developed in an attempt to further understand the extent to which NTOs use social media through content analysis. The dimensions of this table were adapted from Hays *et al.*'s (2013) study, since their proposed framework provides a basic understanding of factors involved in successful social media marketing. The dimensions were modified for the purpose of this research's objectives. To determine the intercoder reliability, this study used two independent researchers. Intercoder agreement was determined to be 97% which means the two researchers coded 97% of all instances identically. The researchers discussed differences one-by-one until they reached agreement for each case. Collecting data for the items of Table 2. was done in the last week of March, 2014.

Table 2
Coding manual for extent analysis of Facebook use by NTOs

Basic Facebook information	Strategic use analysis
1. Does the NTO have Facebook presence? No (0); Yes, page (1); Yes, page but no activity at all (2); Yes, profile (3)	7. Is the profile picture of the NTO identifiable? No, scenery/fauna/flora (1); No, a person (2); No, flag/a vague logo (3); Yes (4)
2. Record the date when the NTO joined Facebook.	8. Does the NTO allow users to post on their timeline? No (0); Yes, only posts on their timeline (1); Yes, only reviews (2); Yes, posts on the timeline and reviews (3)
3. Record the number of fans associated with the NTO's Facebook page.	9. Does the NTO provide content in different languages? No (0); Yes (1)
4. Record People Talking About This metric associated with the NTO's Facebook page.	10. Does the NTO state its mission statement on Facebook page? No (0); Yes (1)
5. Record the most popular week metric associated with the NTO's Facebook page.	11. Does the NTO state community rules clearly? No (0); Yes (1)
6. What language the NTO uses for communication? Record the most recent 10 posts and answer this question. Only English (1); Local and English (2); Only local (3)	12. Does the NTO describe its respective destination in about section? No (0); Yes (1)
	13. Does the NTO use photos app in Facebook? No (0); Yes (1)
	14. Does the NTO use videos app in Facebook? No (0); Yes (1)
	15. Does the NTO use events app in Facebook? No (0); Yes (1)
	16. Does the NTO use notes app in Facebook? No (0); Yes (1)
	17. Does the NTO use feeds for its other social media applications? (e.g. Twitter feed) No (0); Yes (1)
	18. Does the NTO use other interactive apps in Facebook? (e.g. a game) No (0); Yes (1)

Findings and analysis

The objective of this study was to provide a detailed understanding of the current state of practice of using social media in destination marketing. The analysis of this chapter serves as a means to achieve this objective. The analysis was done on generic and specific levels consecutively. The generic analysis provides an understanding of which social media applications and types are used by NTOs of the world while the specific analysis focuses on the top social media site used by NTOs, i.e. Facebook, and uses different measurements to understand NTOs' strategic use of social media in more details.

The first step was to identify websites of NTOs as a basis for identifying their social media presence. The analysis showed that from 193 UN members, 172 (89.1%) have official website.

The next step was to determine the level of social media usage by NTOs. Hence, websites were closely inspected to find the links to social media networks in which NTOs were present. Table 3 summarizes the result of this extensive analysis which reveals twenty social media applications falling into 12 categories of social media types (see Table 1) were used by NTOs around the world. Facebook (66.8%; N=129), Twitter (53.4%; N=103), YouTube (48.7%; N=94) and Flickr (19.7%; N=38) were the most popular social media sites among NTOs. Additionally, the analysis shows that Social Networks (66.8%; N=129), Microblogging (53.4%; N=103), Video Sharing (49.7%; N=96) and Photo Sharing (34.7%; N=67) are used more than the other types of social media by NTOs.

It was also determined that Europe is the leading continent in using social media as 42 (95.5%) European countries are presented in at least one social media application. On the opposite pole lies Africa that clearly lags behind other continents as 32 (59.3%) of its countries are not using social media. Asian countries are also slower than other countries of the world in adopting social media as 17 (36.20%) Asian countries do not use any social media application.

Georgia and Thailand are presented in 10 social media sites and hence, are the top NTOs in number of social media applications used to promote their destinations. However, it should be noted that the presence in numerous social media sites is not an advantage per se since what makes a successful social media presence is being active and engaging customers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Table 3
Social media distribution for NTOs

SM type	SM application	Frequency	%	Total frequency	Total %
Social Networks	Facebook	129	66.8	129	66.8
	Google+	29	15.0		
	MySpace	2	1.0		
Microblogging	Twitter	103	53.4	103	53.4
Video Sharing	YouTube	94	48.7	96	49.7
	Vimeo	3	1.6		

Table 3 Continued

SM type	SM application	Frequency	%	Total frequency	Total %
Photo Sharing	Flickr	38	19.7	67	34.7
	Pinterest	36	18.7		
	Instagram	25	13.0		
Social Travel Networks	TripAdvisor	31	16.1	32	16.6
	WAYN	1	0.5		
Rich Site Summary	RSS	29	15.0	29	15.0
Blogging	Blog	16	8.3	19	9.8
	Tumblr	7	3.6		
Location-based Apps	Foursquare	7	3.6	7	3.6
Professional Social Networks	Linkedin	6	3.1	6	3.1
International Social Networks	VK	2	1.0	3	1.6
	Svejo	1	0.5		
Social Bookmarking	StmbleUpon	3	1.6	3	1.6
Document sharing	Scribd	1	0.5	1	0.5

Table 4
Social media presence by continents

Continents		Present in at least one social media outlet?		Total
		No	Yes	
North America	Frequency	2	20	22
	%	9.1	90.90	100.0
South America	Frequency	1	11	12
	%	8.3	91.70	100.0
Europe	Frequency	2	42	44
	%	4.5	95.50	100.0
Africa	Frequency	32	22	54
	%	59.3	40.70	100.0
Asia	Frequency	17	30	47
	%	36.2	63.80	100.0
Australia/Oceania	Frequency	4	10	14
	%	28.6	71.40	100.0

An analysis of the language of communication

To understand the preferred language of communication in top social media sites, the most recent ten posts of all NTOs in Facebook and Twitter were analyzed on March 8th, 2014. The result of this analysis suggested that Facebook pages of NTOs mostly use English as the only language to communicate with their users while in Twitter, the tendency to use non-English native languages is higher compared to Facebook. Note that two Facebook pages and two Twitter pages of NTOs were excluded from this analysis as they had no activity since they joined these sites.

Table 5

Language used for communication by NTOs' Facebook and Twitter pages

Social media type	Only English	Both English and native non-English	Only native non-English
Facebook	79.5%	11.8%	8.7%
Twitter	65.3%	20.8%	13.9%

An analysis of extent of use of Facebook by NTOs

As Table 3 and Table 5 suggest, Facebook is the preferred social media site for NTOs to market their destinations for international travelers. Therefore, the focus of the analysis will be on Facebook to understand the extent to which NTOs use social media.

A basic statistical analysis

The oldest member of NTOs Facebook users is Jamaica that joined Facebook on November, 2007. Ever since, other NTOs began to adopt this social media platform. However, as it is shown in Table 6, the adoption process was relatively slow as the majority of NTOs (64.4%; N=83) joined Facebook after January 1st, 2010. Czech Republic is the latest NTO that joined Facebook on November, 2013.

Table 6

The distribution of dates NTOs joined Facebook

Year	Frequency	%
2007	1	0.8
2008	9	7.0
2009	36	27.9
2010	37	28.7
2011	20	15.5
2012	17	13.2
2013	9	7.0

According to Facebook (2014), businesses, brands and organizations must use pages while profiles are to be used for individual, non-commercial use. Still, two NTOs have created personal profiles which is not only against Facebook terms of use but also against what people expect to see on Facebook (Stankov, 2010). As such, these NTOs were not included in the further Facebook analysis.

One measure of a Facebook page's effectiveness is the number of fans it has attracted. The average number of fans, synonym for the number of "likes" (Facebook, 2013), for NTOs at the time of data collection was 238,963 ranging from only 21 fans of National Tourist Board - Sierra Leone to 5,466,351 fans of Australia.com. As it is shown in Table 7, most NTOs (35.4%; N=45) have less than 9,999 users while only 6.3% (N=8) of NTOs have one million or more fans.

Furthermore, while it was expected that the pages with longer presence in Facebook have more fans, it was found that it is not always the case for NTOs' Facebook pages. For example, although Malaysia's

Facebook page is established since 2011 it had 1,928,275 fans at the time of data collection which is significantly higher than Feel Slovenia that joined Facebook on 2009 and had only 48,610 fans.

Table 7
**Percentage of NTOs fan base and
 Average community involvement rate**

Number of fans	Frequency	% of NTOs by the number of fans	Average Community Involvement rate
1 - 9,999	45	35.4%	3.30%
10,000 - 99,999	39	30.7%	6.37%
100,000 - 499,999	30	23.6%	5.35%
500,000 - 999,999	5	3.9%	5.55%
1,000,000+	8	6.3%	3.56%

Beside the number of fans, “People Talking About This” or PTAT is another important metric which emphasizes engagement beyond the simple number of likes. PTAT for a page is the number of unique users that have created a story about the page in a seven-day period. People can create a story when they engage in activities such as liking a page, posting on the page timeline and commenting on a post (Darwell, 2012). NTOs had an average PTAT of 10,625 which means that on average 10,625 people have had created a story about NTOs in a seven-day period at the time of data collection. Thus, to have a snapshot of how successfully NTOs had engaged their users, community involvement rate was determined by dividing PTAT value by number of fans for each NTO. Therefore, this measure reflects the involvement per fan value for pages. Table 7 shows community involvement for NTOs Facebook pages according to the number of their fans. Community involvement and number of fans are shown together since it is argued that as the number of fans increases, involving fan base becomes more difficult (Eyl, 2013; Socialbakers, 2013). The results confirm this argument as NTOs with more than one million fans have the least community involvement rate (3.56%) and NTOs with smaller fan bases (10,000 – 99,999) score the best community involvement rate (6.37%).

The strategic use analysis

Through basic statistical analysis of NTOs presence in Facebook it was possible to reach conclusions about the magnitude of use and effectiveness of their presence. However, basic statistical analysis does not provide necessary means to understand how NTOs are employing Facebook platform. Thus, the analysis of this section aims at reaching this understanding by focusing on five dimensions of NTOs Facebook use including identifiability, attitude towards user participation, customization, information availability and innovativeness.

Identifiability was the first dimension of the analysis to examine whether users can easily recognize NTOs’ Facebook pages when they use Facebook internal search to find NTOs. Hence, the profile pictures of NTOs were analyzed. Table 8 summarizes the findings relating to identifiability. The majority of NTOs (81.1%; N=103) used identifiable profile pictures. For instance, Greece page used the logo of Greece NTO accompanied by the tagline text “GREECE, ALL TIME CLASSIC”. However, 18.9%

(N=24) of NTOs used the pictures of their flag, a vague logo, a person, scenery, fauna or flora as their profile pictures. With the large number of Facebook search results, it is difficult for users to recognize if these pages represent official tourism boards of the countries they are searching for.

Table 8
Identifiable profile picture?

Picture content		Frequency	%
No	Scenery/fauna/fiona	10	7.9
	A person	1	0.8
	A flag/a vague logo	13	10.2
Yes	An identifiable logo	103	81.1

Attitude of NTOs towards user participation was measured by examining whether NTOs allowed users to post on their Facebook timeline or they limited the participation to likes, comments and shares of admin posts. Timeline is the heart of a Facebook page where people can update their status and upload various kinds of contents such as photos and videos (Facebook, 2011). Facebook allows users to turn on or off the ability of other people to post on one's page. The analysis is summarized in Table 9. As Facebook is a conversation driven social media network, it is suggested that pages invite people to dialogue. However, 17.3% (N=22) of NTOs did not allow users to post on their timeline and only 18.10% (N=23) allowed users to both post on their timelines and post their reviews about page.

Table 9
NTO allows users to post on their timeline?

Type of user engagement		Frequency	%
No	Users can only interact with admin posts	22	17.3
Yes	Only posts on the timeline	75	59.10
	Only reviews	7	5.50
	Post on the timeline and reviews	23	18.10

The third dimension of strategic use analysis concerns the level of customization and is measured by investigating whether NTOs provided content in different languages or not. Through the Global Pages feature of Facebook, pages can redirect their users to the best version of their page, customized according to the country the users are in; thereby providing their users with localized content (e.g. localized cover photos, profile photos, about section and news feed). However, only 9.4% (N=12) of NTOs utilized this possibility and the majority (90.6%; N=115) of them were only presented on Facebook through a single page.

Given that one of the main reasons that users join NTOs in Facebook is to search for information they need (Chung & Buhalis, 2008), it is important that NTOs provide essential information in their pages. In this part of analysis, Facebook pages of NTOs were probed to determine if they have provided their mission statement, community rules and a description of their respective destinations. As Table 10 shows, less than half of NTOs provided their users with this basic information. Only 45.7% (N=58) of NTOs provided information about their purpose and the difference that their existence make to their context, i.e. their mission statement (Normann, 2001). Further, since a brand's image might

suffer as a result of inappropriate content being posted on pages by fans, it is important to develop clear community rules and communicate those rules to users. Yet, no more than 26% (N=33) of NTOs provided their users with such rules (e.g. what kind of posts will be deleted by moderators, privacy policy, etc.). Also, the number of NTOs that described the characteristics of their destination in their “about” section did not exceed 53 (41.7%). As an example, Discover Dominica’s page portrayal of Dominica is a concise yet persuasive description: “Dominica - The Nature Island is filled with lush green rainforests, cascading waterfalls, friendly Indigenous people, largest Boiling lake, natural spas and exciting rhythms.”

Table 10
Information availability

Information type	Yes	
	Frequency	%
NTO states its mission statement clearly?	58	45.7
NTO states community rules clearly?	33	26.0
NTO describe its respective destination’s characteristics?	53	41.7

Innovativeness dimension was also assessed to understand the NTOs level of creativity in using Facebook. The analysis, which is summarized in Table 11, demonstrated that several destinations (44.1%; N=56) failed to take full advantage of the Facebook feature that allows pages to develop unique and interactive applications such as interactive maps, games and contests to creatively engage their customers. Best practice example for this area is “Amazing Thailand” page that have created several applications to engage its users. For example, through a game named “Smile Land Game” users can learn about Thailand destination. The page “Feel Slovenia” is another example for using interactive applications as they utilize gamification concepts in their Facebook page. Gamification is the application of game elements into non-game concepts such as business (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled & Nacke, 2011). “Feel Slovenia” page has utilized an application named “Top Fans” in which users of the page are able to see their points and leaderboard according to their level of interaction with page, and thus users are recognized for their contribution to the community. Such applications can create motivation for fans to engage more with the page.

Table 11
Innovativeness

Innovation type	Yes	
	Frequency	%
NTO uses unique interactive apps?	71	55.9
NTO uses photos app?	127	100.0
NTO uses videos app?	50	39.4
NTO uses events app?	47	37.0
NTO uses notes app?	37	29.1
NTO uses feeds for its other social media outlets?	63	49.6

Moreover, photos application which allows users to upload albums of photos is the most popular application among NTOs as all of them use it. However, all other Facebook applications (videos, events, notes and feeds for other social media sites of pages) are underutilized by NTOs as less than half of NTOs use each of these applications.

Discussions

The main purpose of this study was to examine the current state of practice of use of social media in destination marketing. To accomplish this aim, the extent of use of social media by world's NTOs was explored. Even though the research required an intense effort from the researcher as the process could not be automated, the findings of study might prove to be worthwhile as they can provide a basis for the future studies in the area of use of social media in destination marketing.

This exploratory research offers insights into the use of social media in destination marketing as well as implications for tourism providers. Social media has influenced the way we do business to a great extent. On the one hand, social media provides businesses with direct and timely contact with their customers globally and at relatively low cost compared to traditional communication tools, and enables companies to create long-term relationships with their customers. On the other hand, social media amplifies the power of customers by empowering them to actively contribute to the content creation and freely communicate with each other and businesses. Therefore, some argue that not participating in social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube means not participating in cyberspace at all (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, the findings of the extent analysis revealed that about one-third of national tourism boards still have not presence in any kind of social media application. When drawing conclusions about the level of NTOs presence in social media, it should be noted that at the time of data collection, at least six governments, including China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan and Vietnam had blocked the access to Facebook, YouTube or Twitter to some degree (Liebelson, 2014). On a parallel note, it should be noted that continents significantly differ from one another in using social media by their countries' NTOs. Europe leads the continents in this area as only two of its countries (4.50%) were not present in at least one social media application while on the other side, most African countries (59.30%; N=32) had not taken advantage of using social media to market their destinations.

The priorities given to social media types and the sophistication level were different among destinations. The majority of NTOs with social media presence were only active in Facebook and Twitter. YouTube and Flickr were the other favorite social media applications used by NTOs aimed at providing potential travelers with a visual experience of destinations in cyberspace. Meanwhile, it was shown that the tendency in using only English as the medium of communication is higher in Facebook compared to Twitter. The finding may lead to the conclusion that for many NTOs Facebook is used for international audience while Twitter is more towards local customers.

The extent analysis focused on Facebook as it was determined that it is the top social media application used by NTOs. The analysis of date NTOs joined Facebook revealed a pattern similar to Roger's (2003) adoption of an innovation which is a bell-shaped curve in which frequency of adopters are plotted against time they adopted the innovation. As such, NTOs could be categorized into innovators, early

adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards according to the time they joined Facebook. Various metrics revealed that NTOs were not effectively attracting and engaging users. The majority of NTOs' Facebook pages had below 9,999 fans and on average, only 10,625 people had created a story about NTOs' pages in one-week periods.

In addition, five dimensions were scrutinized to make sense of strategic use of Facebook by NTOs. The dimensions were identifiability, attitude towards user participation, customization, information availability and innovativeness. On the bright side, the progress in some areas seemed to be encouraging. To illustrate, the previous research of Stankov (2010) showed that the majority of European NTOs did not use identifiable profile pictures which made it difficult for users to find NTOs when they searched for NTOs using Facebook's internal search. In the present research, it was demonstrated that 81.1% (N=103) of NTOs around the world with Facebook presence used identifiable profile pictures which is a promising improvement. However, about twenty percent of NTOs still used pictures such as scenery or a flag that could make it difficult for users to recognize if they represent the official tourism organization of the destination they are searching for. It is suggested that NTOs use identifiable logos as their profile picture accompanied by a simple, unique and memorable tagline (e.g. Amazing Thailand) to make their page identifiable for potential users, thus providing the foundation to increase their fan base. Surprisingly, some NTOs did not allow users to post content on their timelines. Such approach is similar to traditional one-way communication methods, and is in contrast to the nature of social media in which people do not participate only as audience but they expect to be active contributors. Although users still can interact with admin posts through likes, comments and shares, these NTOs miss the opportunity of interacting more with their fans, hearing their opinions and providing them with specific information they might need. One reason for adopting this approach might be that the lack of control over users' posted content may lead NTOs to feel uncomfortable. Following this line of reasoning, it was found that only a few NTOs had provided their users with clear community rules about for example what was considered to be inappropriate by the NTO. Further, only a few of NTOs provide their users with localized content. In addition, it was found that less than half of NTOs utilize unique, creative and interactive applications such as interactive maps, virtual tours and games to engage their customers to engage specific target customers. Thus, the analysis of those NTOs with Facebook presence on the basis of dimensions of identifiability, attitude towards user participation, customization, information availability and innovativeness demonstrated that most NTOs are not using the possibilities offered by Facebook to their full potential.

Conclusions, limitations, and future research

While this research contributes to the existing literature by providing a detailed understanding of use of social media in destination marketing and offers some interesting insights, the study has some limitations. These limitations can give ideas for future research. Firstly, given the ever-evolving nature of social media platforms, the cross sectional approach of this study can only offer a snapshot of the current situation of use of social media in destination marketing. Thus, it is recommended that future research adopt a longitudinal approach to examine the use of social media by tourism providers in different points of time. Such approach can reveal how tourism providers change their social media strategies in accordance with social media changes over time. Secondly, the analysis of strategic use of

Facebook for NTOs of the world was based on five dimensions and some hidden dimensions might not be identified in this research. Future studies also could focus on only one dimension such as innovativeness to provide in-depth insight about the current state of individual dimensions and how to improve them. Furthermore, an in-depth case study approach can be taken in future studies in order to offer insight into both succeeded and failed social media strategies used by tourism providers. Last but not least, the design and methodology of this study can be employed in other contexts such as food industry to identify best practices and thus enabling cross-learning across industries.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that many NTOs are still not aware of potential and opportunities offered by social media and for those with social media presence, there is a great room for improvement in strategic use of social media. This paper strongly encourages tourism providers to actively participate in social media in order to engage the potential travelers through developing and implementing innovative and interesting content while providing users with adequate information and timely responses to their concerns and enquiries. This would not be an easy task for tourism providers as it will need new ways of thinking and even new business models to impress today's hard-to-impress customers. Further, given the limited resources available to NTOs and since there are numerous social media applications available on the internet, this paper recommends NTOs to priorities their presence in different types of social media according to the current impact of social media application, the target group they want to reach and the message they want to communicate.

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