BUSINESS APPLICATION OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST: THE CASE OF NAUTICAL TOURISM IN CROATIA[*]

Krešimir Žnidar[**]
Nikša Alfirević[***]
Jurica Pavičić[****]

In this paper, we discuss how psychological characteristics of tourists, belonging to the same community of interest, their social interactions and the emergence of 'community-like' social structures influence major marketing outcomes in nautical tourism. We hypothesize that the communities of interests lead to the mutual social bonding in different fields, relevant for business, which produces tangible marketing outcomes. The initial empirical analysis for this hypothesis is conducted for the case of nautical tourism on the Croatian Adriatic.

1. COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS IN THE BUSINESS CONTEXT

This paper uses the multi-disciplinary approach to the notion of community, in order to describe the emerging interactions among the special interest tourism customers, who are considered to be the members of the

communities of interest. Our aim is to apply the psychological and sociological analysis of such communities, so as to determine whether the appropriate management of their members' social relationships could result in increased satisfaction and loyalty in special interest tourism.

The classical social theory describes a community in terms of a social structure, inherently related to the locality, such as a settlement, city, or an individual city neighborhood. Nevertheless, contemporary communities become increasingly deterritorialized, as the social life of their members becomes less dependent on the local environment due to the influence of the contemporary capitalist societies and their consumption-oriented cultures (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1972; Deleuze & Guatarri, 1980). Consequently, even the human culture becomes 'decoupled' from the place of its origin (Appadurai, 1996) and takes new forms, as globalization brings closer members of once distant communities.

There are two significant aspects in which space, as a factor of social practices, becomes open for (re)interpretation. On the one hand, communities are becoming conceptualized by being embedded into the shared interests, identities, professions, passions, beliefs, hobbies, leisure activities, etc. (Obst, Zinkiewicz & Smith, 2002). On the other, a new kind of geography emerges with the development of computer-mediated communication (CMC), serving as a ground for the mental construction of the imagined realm of electronic communications - the cyberspace. Within this realm, virtual (online) communities emerge, transcending the traditional social bonds of kinship, nationality, etc. They accentuate the notion of 'belonging by choice' (Wilson, 2002), initially established by the communities of interest. Once again, (re)creating their own identity, free from the social, cultural and, even, biological restrictions, may lead to achieving social liberation (Mehra, Bharat & Bishop, 2004). However, the 'disembodied' identity, unrestricted by tradition, has a 'dark side', as well, reflected in the issues of authenticity, identity verification and the lack of trust among the actors of CMC (Vrooman, 2002).

Depending on prevalent motivation and behavior, the social dynamics leads to different forms of online communities, with only some of those being relevant in the business context (Armstrong & Hagel, 1995). An additional challenge is found in establishing competences required to manage the social life of a community (Preece, Nonnecke & Andrews, 2004) and 'navigating' it toward the business goals (Williams & Cothrel, 2000). Finally, customers are actively taking part in the marketing communication process, as they create and share their own content and interact (Meadows Klue, 2008). Such participation

is even becoming considered as attractive, due to interactivity of the emerging community relationships and the flow experience (Wu & Chang, 2005), associated with the senses of individual efficacy and cognitive enjoyment (Hoffman & Novak, 1996).

If the territorial embeddedness is 'stripped' from classical Park's (1936:3) definition of a community, one is left with the relationship of mutual interdependence, i.e. psychological acknowledgment of a common belonging and a readiness to make use of the shared competences in the pursuit of collective objectives. Therefore, the psychological *sense of community belonging,* previously theoretically modeled by McMillan & Chavis (1986), seems to be a key variable for further research.

2. APPLICATION OF THE COMMUNITY OF INTEREST CONCEPT IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY: IS THERE A 'NAUTICAL COMMUNITY' AND WHAT IS ITS BUSINESS SIGNIFICANCE?

For contemporary tourists, the buying decision is being, by a range of actors beside the service provider and with the fellow travelers, becoming one of the most significant sources of information. Namely, the contemporary business in the field of tourism is characterized by a wealth of information, access to direct distribution of tourist products and interactions with peers in virtual communities (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The choice of those actors is also becoming increasingly flexible, since individuals tend to 'customize' their social interactions, which can be described in term of personal communities (Chayko, 2008). These personal communities/networks are often 'picked and chosen' from a mix of physical and virtual social relationships, with social contacts and interactions flowing from the territorial part of the personal community to the online one and vice versa (Wellman et al, 2006). This creates ample opportunities for the deconstruction and customization of mass tourism products, in line with the trends in deconstruction of territorial communities and social relationships.

Nautical tourists – owners of sailing boats represent one such community of interest, which is, *per definitionem,* attached to a specific physical location – the one of a marina hosting their vessel. Namely, these individuals, as opposed to tourists chartering vessels, in order to take part in nautical tourism, have a more significant relationship to the marina, as a provider of annual mooring service. The value of vessels owned is, usually, also quite considerable, which represents another motive for a long-term relationship with the service provider.

This (sub)segment of a nautical tourism seems to be a perfect research arena for establishing whether the idea of a 'personalized' community of interest is relevant in the contemporary tourist industry, with relevant relationships among the service provider and the nautical tourists/vessel owners, as well as among the tourists themselves. Their existence is indicated by the existence of the sailing-related virtual communities. Those include a range of computer-based sailing simulations, enabling internet users to take part in online sailing competitions with their peers (including the *virtualregatta.com*) and online communities for users of sailing computer games/simulations, such as *Sail Simulator* and *Virtual Skipper*). There is also a wealth of online communities dedicated to sharing routes and pictures/videos from sailing trips (*sailtail.com*), finding crew and fellow passengers, interested in sharing a sailing trip (*vogavecmoi.com, yotspot.com*), online forums and collaborative (Wiki) pages/sites for networking and discussions related to nautical destinations and marina recommendations (*sailangle.com, sailnet.com, cruiserswiki.org*), etc. However, the existing research on communities and tourism, reviewed in the following section, seems to be rather fragmentary and concentrated exclusively on virtual communities.

Nevertheless, prior research on the tangible effects of community interactions, including online communities, is not especially extensive. Apart from conceptual papers on virtual communities in tourism (Wang, Yu & Fesenmaier, 2002), analysis of benefits/incentives for their users (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004) and discussions of methodological research problems (Illum, Ivanov & Lian, 2010), there is very limited evidence on the community effectiveness in all forms of tourism. However, some empirical studies try to assess the influence of virtual tourist/travel communities to customer purchasing decisions/loyalty (Kim, Lee & Hiemstra, 2004), effects of tourist-community web site design on satisfaction/loyalty (Sanchez-Franco & Rondan-Cataluña, 2010) and service/information quality in relation to their members' satisfaction, trust and purchasing decisions (Elliot, Li & Choi, 2012). Unfortunately, none of the currently available empirical studies addresses the interactions in mixed (both territorial and virtual) communities of interests.

3. THEORETICAL MODEL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

3.1. Constructs, measurement scales and hypotheses

We used several constructs for modeling the performance effects of communities of interest in nautical tourism. Following the ground-breaking

study by Kim, Lee & Hiemstra (2004), the sense of belonging to the community of interest has been used to distinguish between the nautical tourists, whose customer behavior is (not) influenced by the social relationships within their portable (personal) community. The psychological sense of community belonging is measured by the 'Sense of Community Index' (SCI), which has been validated by multiple studies in special fields of sociology, in a range of different contexts, i.e. business communities, geographical communities (or neighborhoods), communities of interest, etc. (see, e.g. Pretty & McCarthy, 1991; Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Obst, Zinkiewich & Smith, 2002). In this study, we use a brief SCI version, with all items measured on an 11-point Likert scale, as suggested by Long & Perkins (2003).

Since it is extremely difficult to model financial outcomes of social interactions, we opt for the well-described and often used approach, which uses the customer satisfaction as a leading indicator of financial performance in the future (Lambert, 1998). Satisfaction is used as an antecedent and predictor of loyalty, which should, in the long term, result in the financial performance. This has been previously confirmed by classical marketing studies (e.g. Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Heskett, Sasser & Schlesinger, 1997), as well as by studies in the tourism setting (e.g. Yoon & Uysal, 2005).

Therefore, loyalty could be viewed as a proxy for the future financial performance. The usage of such marketing metrics is rather common in evaluating the community-friendly forms of tourism, focusing to tourists' special interests (e.g. Gandhi-Arora & Shaw, 2002; Willliams & Soutar, 2009), but it is also used by previously described studies, dealing with virtual communities in tourism. We believe that a significant contribution to further discussion, arising from this model, might be the introduction of social interactions within a community of interest, as a factor comparable to satisfaction with the services rendered.

The measurement of nautical tourists' satisfaction has to take into consideration various specific aspects. This study targets vessel owners, who are the only segment of nautical tourists (as opposed to charter users) who are able to purchase annual mooring services from nautical ports and other providers. Therefore, it is easy to identify such nautical tourists and approach them, by using the data provided by marina establishments, which is not the case with nautical tourists chartering their vessels.

Items relevant for measurement of satisfaction in the environment of nautical tourism have been identified by conducting in-depth interviews with

experts from academic and business community, as a part of the empirical work for an unpublished doctoral dissertation (Žnidar, 2012). All items are measured on an 11-point Likert scale, which is also the case with the SCI measurement.

Due to the multidimensionality of the loyalty construct (Mele, 2001) and the methodological problems in empirical attribution of repeat purchase to loyalty effects (Riley, Niininen, Szivas & Willis, 2001), we opted for measurement of its attitudinal component. To address the arguments of Oppermann (2000), who criticized the attitudinal approach, due to the lack of an appropriate composite indicator and the possible changes of attitudes over time, we used the recommendation intention as a composite proxy for attitudinal loyalty.
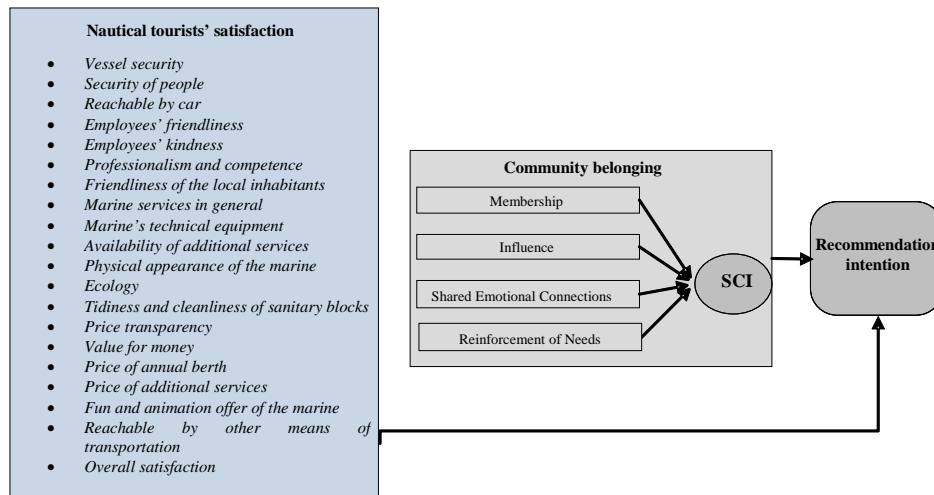
According to Reichheld (2003), the recommendation intention, measured by the Net Promoter Score (NPS), has been described as being both superior to other measures of relevant attitudes, as well as a powerful predictor of behavioral loyalty. Although the metric has been criticized as the ultimate predictor of sales growth (Keiningham, Cooil, Andreassen & Aksoy, 2007), the methodological challenges to this indicator do not make it *"a useless metric or remotely a poor one"* (Keiningham, Aksoy, Coil, Andreassen & Williams, 2008:88). In further research, the NPS could be replaced by more complex indicators of attitudinal and/or behavioral loyalty, if the empirical results demonstrate this line of research as promising.

The wording for the NPS item, as well as its measurement, are prescribed by Reichheld (op.cit.), who uses the 11-point scale, with three recommendation levels (from zero to six – *detractors*, from seven to eight – *passives*, from nine to ten - *promoters*). We strived to consistently use the 11-point scale for measurement of all questionnaire items, so as to avoid potential distractions, as participants address different scales across the research instrument. The following figure illustrates our theoretical model, including constructs and items used for their measurement.

The relationships, presented by Figure 1, lead to a simple hypothesis, which will be tested in the following section of this study.

Hypothesis: *A sense of belonging to a nautical community of interest and the level of nautical tourists' satisfaction are predictors of their intention to recommend their provider of mooring services.*

Figure 1. Theoretical model, constructs and measurement items

Nautical tourists' satisfaction

- *Vessel security*
- *Security of people*
- *Reachable by car*
- *Employees' friendliness*
- *Employees' kindness*
- *Professionalism and competence*
- *Friendliness of the local inhabitants*
- *Marine services in general*
- *Marine's technical equipment*
- *Availability of additional services*
- *Physical appearance of the marine*
- *Ecology*
- *Tidiness and cleanliness of sanitary blocks*
- *Price transparency*
- *Value for money*
- *Price of annual berth*
- *Price of additional services*
- *Fun and animation offer of the marine*
- *Reachable by other means of transportation*
- *Overall satisfaction*

Community belonging

Membership
Influence
Shared Emotional Connections
Reinforcement of Needs

SCI

Recommendation intention

Source: Žnidar (2012).

3.2. Research instrument, data collection and analysis

Previously described items and their measurement scales, including the recommended wording for description of individual items and constructs (especially the SCI components and the NPS), were used to construct a questionnaire, which was tested in a pilot study. It involved 57 participants - vessel owners, which were selected in five marina establishments, located in central Dalmatia. Research participant was defined as a person who is either a decision-maker, or a co-decision maker in the marina selection process and, simultaneously, owns a vessel of his/her own. Only one person from a single vessel was chosen to take part in the survey. If there were more persons from one vessel who fitted such criteria, the first person to be approached by the interviewer was selected. Sampling was systematic, but without any post-hoc sample correction, with the 'traditional' survey administration, based on the paper-aided face-to-face method by the trained interviewers. The pilot study did not find any major flaws in the research instrument, or the research design, and although its sample was rather small, it can be considered as appropriate for the objective of this research (Sheatsley, 1983).

The final data collection was performed in the both low and high summer season, at seven major marina establishments on the Croatian Adriatic coast (*Punat* - the island of Krk, *Split* – the city of Split, *Šimuni* - the island of Pag,

Frapa - city of the Rogoznica, *Veruda* - the city of Pula, *Kornati* - the city of Biograd and *Zadar* - the city of Zadar). Systematic sampling was used, with several locations used to cover the spatial extent of marinas. Potential respondents were approached at each of the selected locations, with each fifth person invited to participate in the survey (after a random starting point). The sample consisted of 389 respondents. The sample was weighted post-hoc (by country, season and vessel type), as to fully represent the population of nautical tourists in Croatia. Data analysis was performed using IBM's SPSS 20, involving simple descriptive statistics, multiple linear regression, discriminant, reliability and factor analysis (with checks applied for possible breaking of fundamental statistical assumptions).

3.3. Research results

Firstly, we performed an exploratory factor analysis, so as to reduce the number of items relevant for nautical tourists' satisfaction (originally introduced by four interviewed experts). After checking for applicability of factor analysis (with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy being equal to 0.897 and Bartlett's test of sphericity χ^2=4186.52, p = 0.0000), we used the Principal Component Analysis (with Oblimin rotation).

The resulting structure matrix (see Table 1) confirms the existence of several specific dimensions of nautical tourists' satisfaction. Those can be explained in terms of items loading onto four individual factors, which include different aspects of:
- *Services* (provided by the marina establishment) – explaining 47.81% of the total variance;
- *Price* – explaining 11.1% of the total variance;
- *Security and accessibility* (of the marina) – explaining 6.76% of the total variance and
- *Other/various* (aspects of satisfaction) – explaining 7.07% of the total variance.

A rather high level of Cronbach α indicator value for each of the empirically obtained factors, also implies a high level of internal consistency of our approach to measuring nautical tourists' satisfaction. Only one item, i.e. accessibility by means of transportation different from a car, or a airplane, had been previously excluded from the 'Security and accessibility' factor, due to a very low value of the Cronbach α indicator.

Table 1. Nautical tourists' satisfaction structure matrix

Factors and variables	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cronbach α
Services		**8.606**	**47.811**	**.900**
Employees' friendliness	.752			
Professionalism and competence	.746			
Marine services in general	.738			
Employees' kindliness	.701			
Tidiness and cleanliness of sanitary blocks	.479			
Price		**1.998**	**11.099**	**.915**
Price of annual berth	.932			
Price of additional services	.907			
Value for money	.812			
Price transparency	.774			
Other		**1.272**	**7.068**	**.809**
Fun and animation offer of the marina	.785			
Availability of additional services	.735			
Physical appearance of the marina	.640			
Technical equipment at the marina	.566			
Ecology	.559			
Security and accessibility		**1.217**	**6.760**	**.796**
Reachable by car	.888			
Vessel security	.634			
Security of the crew/guests	.567			
Other guests of the marina	.545			
Total variance explained (%)			**72.737**	

Source: Research results.

In order to create composite measures for both the nautical tourists' community belonging and satisfaction, we transformed the original values of SCI indicators by using the average of the items' z-scores (standardized values).

The same procedure was applied to the original values of satisfaction-related items, grouped according to the matrix structure of the four empirical factors.

A simple multiple linear regression procedure was further used, in order to test the nautical tourists' community belonging and satisfaction as predictors of the recommendation intention. Regression results (see Table 2) for the nautical tourists' satisfaction confirm that it can serve as a rather powerful predictor, which is in line with the existing studies.

Table 2. Nautical tourists' satisfaction as a predictor of recommendation intention

Regression of NPS	Unstand. coeff. B	SE	T	p-value	Tolerance	VIF	R^2	Adj. R^2	F	p
(Constant)	0.056	0.207	0.268	0.789						
Price (z-score)	0.125	0.057	2.215	**0.027**	0.602	1.660				
Service (z-score)	0.659	0.076	8.656	**0.000**	0.391	2.557	0.423	0.417	69.050	0.000
Security and accessibility (z-score)	*0.082*	*0.061*	*1.339*	*0.181*	*0.573*	*1.746*				
Other (z-score)	*-0.008*	*0.031*	*-0.260*	*0.795*	*0.471*	*2.122*				

Source: Research results.

The classical statistical assumptions are met, since levels of VIF are low, i.e. less than 5, while values of tolerance (variance of one predictor, unexplained by the other ones) are higher than the cut-off value of 0.2, which confirms the non-existence of multicollinearity. The entire regression model is highly significant (with $p < 0.01$), although only price and service prove to be useful as empirically significant predictors (both with $p < 0.01$). With the adjusted R^2 explaining 41.7% of the total variance, these two empirical factors of nautical tourists' satisfaction seem to be quite powerful predictors of recommendation intention. On the other hand, community belonging also proves to be a predictor of recommendation intention (i.e. loyalty, since NPS is used as its proxy).

A comparable regression model (see Table 3), also meets the assumptions related to non-existence of multicollinearity, as well as proves to be highly significant (also at p<0.01). Its predictive power of 23.7% of the total variance, as demonstrated by the adjusted R^2 value, **demonstrates the conceptual applicability of our model.** Only the *Influence* dimension of the SCI construct does not seem to be entirely useful, due to the low empirical significance of its regression coefficient (p=0.586).

Table 3. Nautical tourists' community belonging as a predictor of recommendation intention

Regression of NPS	Unstand. coeff. B	SE	T	p-value	Tolerance	VIF	R^2	Adj. R^2	F	p
(Constant)	-0.167	0.063	-2.675	**0.008**						
Membership (z-score)	-0.275	0.104	-2.642	**0.009**	0.840	1.191				
Influence (z-score)	0.059	0.109	0.546	0.586	0.785	1.273	0.253	0.237	21.524	0.000
Reinforce--ment of needs (z-score)	0.650	0.125	5.212	**0.000**	0.629	1.590				
Shared emotional connections (z-score)	0.250	0.105	2.393	0.018	0.688	1.454				

Source: Research results.

As to evaluate both previously analyzed constructs, suggested to serve as predictors for the nautical tourists' recommendation intention, all eight measurement dimensions were entered into a linear multiple regression (see Table 4).

Once again, multicollinearity is not present and the F-test demonstrates significance of the regression model (with a p<0.01, as well), while the adjusted R^2 value of 47.4% indicates the improved predictive power than in the two previously analyzed cases. **These results call for the acceptance of our working hypothesis.**

Table 4. Nautical tourists' satisfaction and community belonging as predictors of recommendation intention

Regression of NPS	Unstand. coeff. B	SE	T	p-value	Tolerance	VIF	R^2	Adj. R^2	F	P
(Constant)	0.275	0.295	0.932	0.352						
Membership (z-score)	-0.150	0.089	-1.675	0.096	0.782	1.279				
Influence (z-score)	-0.080	0.092	-0.862	0.390	0.752	1.330				
Reinforce-ment of needs (z-score)	**0.404**	**0.110**	**3.682**	**0.000**	**0.560**	**1.786**				
Shared emotional connections (z-score)	0.134	0.092	1.456	0.147	0.610	1.639	0.496	0.474	23.008	0.000
Service (z-score)	**0.680**	**0.098**	**6.924**	**0.000**	**0.367**	**2.726**				
Price (z-score)	0.118	0.080	1.478	0.141	0.506	1.977				
Security and accessibility (z-score)	-0.098	0.083	-1.178	0.240	0.443	2.255				
Other (z-score)	-0.056	0.046	-1.218	0.225	0.409	2.444				

Source: Research results.

It is interesting that only **reinforcement of needs** (out of four SCI dimensions that measure belonging to a community of interest) and characteristics of **service** (out of four empirically derived measures of satisfaction) turned out as significant (p<0.01) in this case. The existence of a single significant measurement dimension per each predictor, seems to confirm that a certain level of simplicity, as suggested by Reichheld (op. cit.), might be, indeed, adequate for modeling customer loyalty. Nevertheless, the results of this study are limited to a specific sector within the tourist industry and would need to be further verified.

In order to make a first step in this direction, we performed a discriminant analysis, so as to predict to which group, related to the recommendation intention (i.e. detractors, passives, promoters), a nautical tourist belonged. Predictors included the *Service* empirical factor of the nautical tourists' satisfaction and the *Reinforcement of needs* SCI dimension, as components of the regression model with the highest predictive power.

Due to the existence of three separate NPS groups, two canonical discriminant functions are available, with the eigenvalue of the first one being 0.77 and explaining 96.2% of the variance. The first function also provides a relatively good fit for data, since its Wilks' Lambda value equals 0.544 (and $p<0.00$), while the second one should not be further analyzed, as it Wilks' Lambda of as much as 0.97 demonstrates an extremely high level of unexplained differences in discriminant scores among the groups.

In addition, the structure matrix table revealed a high correlation of both the *Service* (0.903) and *Reinforcement of needs* (0.588) dimensions with the first discriminant function. This function results with the 65.3% of the correctly classified original cases, which represents a hit ratio being approximately 30% larger than the one that could be achieved by chance for the classification of the three groups. We believe that these discrimination statistics validate our initial results and the call for further research.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

We have applied the concept of community belonging to the measurement of tourist loyalty in the specific interest tourism, by using the case of nautical tourism on the Croatian Adriatic coast. The final model to which we have arrived seems to be rather promising in terms of explaining tourists' recommendation intention, used as a loyalty proxy. However, further research is required to address several limitations of this study, which include the need for a more complex approach to loyalty measurement, as well as replication in different aspects of tourism, or even in different industries. With the promising initial empirical results, there are enough arguments for **further research in application of the sociological and psychological community concept in business context,** as well as **developing practical tools/approaches,** which might be especially relevant for the fields of marketing, service management and e-business.

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POSLOVNA PRIMJENA SOCIOLOŠKIH I PSIHOLOŠKIH ASPEKATA ZAJEDNICA FORMIRANIH NA TEMELJU INTERESA: SLUČAJ NAUTIČKOG TURIZMA U HRVATSKOJ

Sažetak

U ovom se radu raspravlja kako psihološke karakteristike turista, koji pripadaju zajednici, formiranoj na temelju dijeljenih interesa, kao i njihove društvene interakcije i pojava društvenih struktura, sličnih teritorijalnim zajednicama, djeluju na ključne poslovne marketinške rezultate u nautičkom turizmu. Pritom se postavlja hipoteza da zajednice, formirane na temelju dijeljenih interesa, vode prema društvenom povezivanju u različitim područjima od interesa za poslovanje, a na osnovu čega se postižu opipljivi marketinški rezultati. Inicijalna empirijska analiza ove hipoteze je provedena na hrvatskom Jadranu, za slučaj nautičkog turizma, kao specifičnog oblika zajednice, formirane na temelju dijeljenog interesa.