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Following and Belonging to an Online Travel Community in Social Media, its Shared Characteristics and Gender Differences

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Abstract

This paper examines the characteristics of social media consisting a sense of belonging and following an online community in the context of tourism. A representative stratified sample of 301 respondents of foreign arrivals of tourists in the Athens airport, Greece in 2014 collected in June and July 2014 was employed. The sense of belonging was measured when following an online travel community. Results illustrated a statistically significant difference between men and women regarding how important it is for them to belong to an online travel community. In addition, research illustrated and described the shared characteristics of an online travel community. Essential features such as language specification requirements, the association of ideas, the exchange of comments and experiences among members are examined for the first time to date in this context in order to identify the framework of this relation. The paper describes the abovementioned characteristics in regard to belonging to an online travel community. The implications of the findings for companies, authorities and Destination Marketing Organizations concerning the shaping of their marketing and communication strategies and the opportunities that are created are further presented.

Keywords: gender and online travel communities; online travel community belonging; social media

1. Introduction and background for the research

Social media play an important role in the promotion and communication of activities, services, and products to the public. People search for information on the internet -the mass communication medium- in order to seek what other people think about a specific product or service and this is called 'the world-of mouth' communication; this

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may take place through a predefined group of friends or with thousands of online-but-connected strangers on an online community where people express their points of view available to all (O'Connor, 2008; Gretzel & Hyan Yoo, 2008). Web applications facilitate a two-way communication and sharing of information, interoperability based on users, communication and initiative, allowing users to collaborate, interact with one another in regard to editing or adding to the website content (Click & Petit, 2010: 138; Chatzithomas et al., 2014).

Travel related information is among the information that people search on the Internet for the purposes of planning a journey or after the trip has taken place in regard to references made for the destination and trip (Gretzel & Hyan Yoo, 2008). Although research has taken place regarding group influence on product purchasing decisions, less time has been spent on services, and even less on tourism; this lack of attention occurs despite the recognition that informal information channels are a powerful force in service purchase decision-making (Currie, Wesley & Sutherland, 2008). It is typical to note the significance attributed to the idea of being able to have access for sharing, collaborating, and updating web content so that others may be able to exchange ideas and points of view without the limit of time or geography creating in that way social networks and relationships on the web (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012).

Messages may be communicated with the implementation of social media; nevertheless, their capabilities have not been realized yet although the communities that can be created online and the sharing of information that takes place online is worth noticing and examining. Research has shown that terminology has yet to be standardized and research on online virtual communities is still in its infancy (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Young Cung & Buhalis, 2008) and there is suggestion from the literature that the sense of belonging and the creation of online communities needs to be further explored and examined (Stavrianea & Kavoura, 2014). There is need for researchers to focus more on examining the perceptions of people who are users of social media and the way they feel about these media and how they perceive them (Ferguson & Greer, 2011; Chan-Olmsted & Cho, 2013). This paper aims to go a step further and examines the characteristics of the online travel community created on social media and the significance attributed to them by people who follow and belong to these online travel communities.

If sharing of ideas and people with common interests meet online together and exchange ideas, social media may in fact create a virtual community, which spreads the 'sense of belonging' to its members, and this may also take place in the tourism industry when someone decides to visit a travel destination (Kavoura & Stavrianea, 2014).

A representative stratified sample of 301 respondents of foreign arrivals of tourists in the Athens airport, Greece in 2014 was collected in June and July 2014 and descriptive statistics was used aiming to illustrate the characteristics of social media that reinforce a sense of belonging and following an online community in the context of tourism. We also aim to measure the sense of belonging among respondents when following an online travel community. In addition, this paper describes the shared characteristics of an online travel community, which are examined for the first time to date in this context in order to identify the framework of this relation.

2. Communication in online travel communities, the creation of an imagined community and gender's role

Platforms are databases of personal information, they become tools for (personal) storytelling and narrative self-presentation (Van Dijck, 2013: 200). Social media offer the possibility of communication with a group of participants who are willing to respond in a shared social context, which has no geographical limits (Boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010). The online audience is potentially limitless, but we often act as if it were bounded since we need a specific language, cultural references, style, and so on that comprise online identity presentation (Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Kavoura & Stavrianea, 2014).

There is a variety of activities one may do on social media such as participate in online word-of-mouth forums including blogs, discussion boards that are sponsored by a company, chat rooms, visit consumer product or services rating sites, Internet discussion boards and forums, sites containing digital audio, images, movies and photographs among others (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Gibson, n.d). People use social media to send messages, create stories, be co-creators of a story and contribute to message sharing for a group of people; in other words, a community is present online and organizations need to realize that it is there. The organization's aim should be to cultivate the feeling of belonging to a group in the real or virtual world, which engages consumers and introduces them to a sense of belonging (Kavoura, 2014).