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Research Paper

The determinants of Facebook social engagement for national tourism organizations' Facebook pages: A quantitative approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the national tourism organizations (NTOs) of the top 10 most-visited countries by international tourists strategically employ Facebook to promote and market their destinations. Based on big data retrieved from the NTOs' Facebook pages, and leveraging advanced metrics for capturing user engagement, the study sheds light on the factors contributing to superior level of social activity. The findings indicate that the way Facebook is tactically employed varies significantly across the NTOs. The panel data regression analyses suggest that engagement is positively affected by posting visual content (namely photos), and posting during the weekends, and negatively affected by evening posting. Post frequency displays no statistically significant effect on social engagement. The study also shows that most of the NTOs (except for Italy, Spain, Turkey and the UK) deploy Facebook with a top-down approach, and spontaneous user-generated content (UGC) is allowed to a very little extent.

1. Introduction

Over the last 50 years, technology developments in transportation, the increase of disposable income to be allocated to travels, the improvement of security and rights for tourists, as well as the intensifying processes of globalization, have significantly contributed to expand the market for travel and tourism activities (UNWTO, 2015). In the 1980s, European tourism destinations held almost 63% of the market share for international tourism (UNWTO, 2014). This share has progressively declined to 51% in 2010 and is projected to further decrease to 41% by 2030 (UNWTO, 2015), while destinations in Asia and Pacific, Middle East and Africa are gaining in terms of their relative share. Moreover, in 2015 emerging economy destinations have surpassed advanced destinations in terms of international tourist arrivals. The overall picture suggests that competition among tourism destinations is escalating (Mariani, Buhalis, Longhi, & Vitouladiti, 2014) and destination management organizations (DMOs) at any level (national and local) should find (new) ways to promote themselves effectively in the global hypercompetitive arena (D'Aveni, 1994).

The introduction, penetration and consolidation of the Internet over the last three decades and online social networks (OSNs) over the last decade have brought about a digital revolution in travel and tourism, disrupting extant business models and introducing new ones, thus deeply modifying the way tourism destinations (and companies) promote and market themselves (Mariani, Baggio, Buhalis & Longhi, 2014a). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have played a crucial role in expanding the industry worldwide, while at the same time have offered cost effective tools for any destination to promote itself and therefore have reinforced competitive trends among destinations themselves (Mariani, Baggio, Buhalis & Longhi, 2014b). In addition to empowering consumers, ICTs provide 'effective tools for suppliers to develop, manage and distribute their offerings worldwide' (Buhalis & Law, 2008: p. 610). While at the beginning of the commercial exploitation of the Internet, information was published by an organization or company and interaction did not exist, today OSNs such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and review sites such as Tripadvisor have created spaces of conversation between organizations and individuals (Boyd & Ellison, 2008) and new markets dominated by the paradigm of an economy revolving around social media, i.e. a 'socialnomics' (Qualman, 2009).

OSNs allow Internet users to collect information, build and develop relationships, make travel-related decisions, share travel experiences, and eventually rate tourism services and providers (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Stepchenkova, Mills, & Jiang, 2007; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). OSNs bring consumer-generated content (CGC) to life: photos, videos, blogs and reviews are posted and

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uploaded every fraction of a second worldwide (Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012; Wenger, 2008) and are widely used by online travellers (Bilgihan, Barreda, Okumus, & Nusair, 2016; White & White, 2007), thereby allowing users rather than organizations to take charge of Internet content (Schegg, Liebrich, Scaglione, & Ahmad, 2008). CGC and online reviews might undermine the reputation of established organizations and brands (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015; Gretzel, 2006; Shea, Enghagen, & Khullar, 2004). DMOs at both the national and local level should pay attention to how they use social media, as this can play a crucial role in effectively promoting and marketing a tourism destination in a global highly competitive context (Baggio, Czakon & Mariani, 2014; D'Aveni, 1994; Mariani & Baggio, 2012).

This paper is one of the outputs of a wider research project carried out by a multidisciplinary research team investigating how DMOs at different levels of government use social media (more specifically Facebook) to promote and market their destinations, with a specific focus on the determinants of social engagement. As such, it is a further extension and validation of the study conducted by Mariani, Di Felice, and Mura (2016). It contributes to the extant body of 'e-tourism research' (i.e., research at the intersection between tourism and ICTs) with a focus on digital destination marketing, from a number of perspectives. First, it adds to the currently scant stream of empirically based studies that investigate DMOs' social media marketing from a quantitative perspective (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Mariani et al., 2016). Specifically, it explores how the national tourism organizations (NTOs) of the top 10 destination countries in terms of international tourist arrivals deploy OSNs – and specifically Facebook – to promote and market their destinations, illustrating their varying degrees of social-media usage. Second, in line with previous literature (Mariani et al., 2016), this work identifies and measures the drivers of increased levels of social activity by means of multivariate regression analyses based on a panel dataset specifically developed for this research project. Finally, some managerial best practices are identified that NTOs can adopt in their use of Facebook.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a review of relevant literature on destination marketing and social media for digital destination marketing. Section 3 illustrates the methodology that was employed. Section 4 reports the research findings and the analysis. Finally, Section 5 discusses both the managerial and policy-making implications of this analysis, describes its limitations, and offers avenues for future research.

2. Destination marketing and online destination marketing

2.1. Destination marketing

Globalization in travel and business, technology development, and an increase in the share of income allocated to travel, have intensified competition between tourism destinations and companies. In this context, destinations are challenged to find new ways to be competitive by providing, managing and marketing positive and memorable tourist and visitor experiences (Mariani & Giorgio, 2017; Mariani, 2015; Mariani & Zan, 2011; Pike & Page, 2014; Pine & Gilmore, 1998) and building strong destination brands (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005).

Historically, DMOs started to be established in the 19th century at various level of government (local, regional, national). Pike and Page (2014), in their chronological account of DMOs, highlight that the first regional tourism organization (RTO) was established in Switzerland at St. Moritz in 1864 (Läesser, 2000), and starting from 1879, municipal promotion was supported by a property tax at Blackpool, England (Walton, 1983). The USA saw the creation of the first convention and visitors' bureau (CVB) at Detroit in 1896 (Ford & Peeper, 2007; Gartrell, 1992; Ward, 1995). Later, in 1901, the first world's first national tourism office was established in New Zealand (McClure, 2004; NZTPD, 1976). The number of DMOs then increased dramatically during the post-war period with many establishing their core marketing role in the 1960s and 1970s (Laws, 1997). Mirroring the proliferation of DMOs, the destination marketing literature started developing in the early 1970s (Pike & Page, 2014), with the study field been characterised by 'a fragmented applied research approach rather than theory building' (Pike & Page, 2014: p. 203).

A further wave of establishment of DMOs' took place over the 1980s–1990s and brought to a population exceeding 10,000 worldwide according to McKercher (see Pike, 2008). Today there is a certain degree of consensus on the fact that destination marketing research deals with the application of theories and techniques to identify and contribute towards solving marketing management decision problems for a destination or a city (Malhotra, 1996) that are typically carried out by DMOs.

The role played by DMOs at different levels of government (nation, state, and municipality) in promoting the competitiveness of their destination has been analyzed in depth by Pike and Page (2014). They underline the relevance of DMOs in the current turbulent environment (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Pike & Page, 2014), even though they note that DMOs frequently can at best influence the competitiveness of a tourism destination only marginally. While DMOs cover not only marketing activities but also other roles such as leadership and coordination, planning and research, product development, partnership and team-building, and community relations (DCG, 2012; Morrison, 2013), this paper will focus on digital destination marketing, which is reviewed in the following subsection.

2.2. Online destination marketing

Over the last 15 years, and looking back from the time of writing, increasing attention has been paid to online (or digital) destination marketing (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015; Fesenmaier, Gretzel, Hwang, & Wang, 2003; Gretzel, Yuan, & Fesenmaier, 2000; Mariani, Baggio, Buhalis, & Longhi, 2014a, 2014b; Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2015; Zhou, 2014) within the wider area of eTourism research (Buhalis & Law, 2008), sometimes with the development of empirical multi-country and international comparative analyses (Feng, Morrison, & Ismail, 2003). In a number of cases, social media marketing – to be intended as a way to reduce the gap between organizations and customers/users (Borges, 2009) – has been analysed as one of the 'mega trends' impacting significantly the tourism system (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013).

For instance, Hays et al. (2013) have analysed the use of social media as a destination marketing tool by national tourism organizations. More specifically, they carried out a content analysis of the Facebook and Twitter accounts on the top 10 international tourism destinations as indicated by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Tourism Highlights 2010 Edition. In their exploratory study, after narrowing down the sample to seven tourism boards' official Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, they analysed the content posted on the aforementioned OSNs in the month of June 2011. The results from the content analysis, as well as the findings from semi-structured interviews, illustrated that the social media strategies of top DMOs varied considerably, and with the exception of the efforts of VisitBritain and Tourism Queensland, were largely rudimentary and experimental. More specifically, the two cases of VisitBritain and Tourism Queensland seemed to offer many examples of best practices for other NTOs starting to enter the world of social media to market their destination to learn from. Three key findings emerged from the study: first, the majority of the DMO analysed were not deploying social media to their full effectiveness in terms of interaction and engagement with consumers. Second, social media were often underfunded and/or neglected, as they were not recognized as a vital tool in marketing strategies. Third, the authors suggest that NTOs should become more innovative and creative in their social media strategies to differentiate digital marketing from traditional marketing methods. Hays et al.

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