APPLICATION OF E-TOOLS FOR TOURISM PROMOTION BY YOUNG-ADULTS IN MACEDONIA

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Abstract: This study is focused on the strengths and challenges associated with using the Internet as a rapidly evolving medium in tourism promotion. For this purpose, the paper examines the young-adult consumers' attitude, mainly towards three aspects: (1) application of Internet for travel and tourism; (2) usage of on-line social networks in sharing travel and tourism experiences; and (3) trust in e-media for tourism promotion purposes. The aim of this research is to determine the level of application of e-tools in tourism promotion by young population in Macedonia. So, this empirical evidence reports on analysis based on data obtained from customer survey among 502 young-adult consumers. The outcomes confirm the research hypothesis and point to crucial importance of introducing e-tools for tourism promotion and increasing the awareness for Macedonia as a tourist destination. Moreover, the paper strongly recommends this concept and urges the need for identifying effective framework for mitigating the up-to-date modest tourism results, thus acting as basis for initial suggestions in improving tourism promotion of the country.
Key words: Young-adults; Internet; On-line social networks; Tourism promotion; Macedonia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Everyone identifies tourism as a source for generating numerous positive impacts. Generally, it contributes to economic growth and development, promoting global community and international understanding and peace, providing tourism and recreational facilities to local people, improving living standards, stimulating local commerce and industry, reinforcing the preservation of heritage and tradition (Goeldner *et al*, 2000). The ground for enhancing all that lies in the quantity of tourists and travelers.

Yet, attracting a bigger number of tourists is not a trouble-free process, particularly in times of ever-changing travel preferences. The rapid development of the Internet, particularly in the past two decades, has changed tourism consumer behaviour dramatically (Mills and Law, 2004). It had an enormous impact on tourism industry, specifically to the way how tourists search for information. Moreover, the Internet, as well as the on-line social networks (OSN) has influenced tourism in significant manner by providing a great variety of services and products on-line (Kabassi, 2010). So, the Web became the leading source of information particularly important in times of increased number of competitors in tourism market. It was detected as the only way-out to be steady-ready to take prompt action. With the increased importance of search in travellers' access to information, tourist destinations and businesses were forced to detect more adequate approaches to adapt to the fast-pace change in the environment (Pan *et al*, 2011). This particularly addresses the on-line tourism supply since tourist destinations have a strong need to acquire data for potential and present tourists and

travelers. By the mediation of digital environment, it is noticeable the obvious tourists' transformation from "passive audiences" to "active players" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000). A noteworthy transformation was made from just passive searching and surfing to creating content, collaborating and connecting. Hence, the development of the Internet and the OSN empowered the "new" tourists who became knowledgeable and ask exceptional value for their money and time (Buhalis and Law, 2008). In this line, the web-booking systems gain in interest as a direction for detecting differences in ways that active/passive tourists use Internet for seeking different kinds of information, booking trips, paying etc.

One may argue that tourism in Macedonia is far behind the competition. The presence of uncoordinated activities, the lack of organisational forms functioning on horizontal and vertical line, unclear set of goals, aims and field of interest within the public, as well as the private tourism sector, resulted in poorly developed tourism in Macedonia (Petrevska, 2010). In order to cope with all serious challenges, obstacles and difficulties, Macedonia has just recently started to work on creating the foundations for increasing its competitiveness in tourism (USAID, 2006). So, all efforts are directed toward promoting Macedonia as an attractive tourist destination. In this respect, attractiveness may be evaluated from the point of view of emotions, experiences, adventures and satisfaction of tourists (Hu and Ritchie, 1993), with respect to the meaning of tourism attractions and business environment (Enright and Newton, 2004) or, by evaluation of different supporting factors which create tourism supply (Dwyer and Kim, 2003). Initially, the concept of tourism competitiveness was related to prices (Dwyer *et al.*, 2000), and later on, econometric models were used for the purpose of ranking (Song and Witt, 2000). It is highly believed that competitiveness determines the success of a sustainable tourist destination (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003) and should take into consideration the comparative advantages as significant factors which determine tourism competitiveness (Ritchie *et al.*, 2001). There is a variety of definitions and approaches, none being correct or false, but rather helpful in formulating hypothesis for proving different aspects of tourism destination competitiveness (Mazanec *et al.*, 2007).

This study, specifically intends to answer the following research questions:
1. Do young-adults use the Internet for travel and tourism purposes?
2. Do young-adults use the OSN in travel and tourism promotion?
3. To what extend are OSN reliable sources for sharing travel and tourism experiences?
4. May e-media be applied for tourism promotion among young population?

In order the meet the research question, the paper is structured in several parts. It starts with some background materials presenting interesting facts regarding tourism and its competitiveness in Macedonia, as well as brief overview regarding tourism and the OSN. The methodology and the research design are noted in section three, which is followed by research results, analyses and discussion in section four. Section five includes conclusions and future research directions.

Generally, the contribution of this paper lies in the fact that it enriches the poorly-developed empirical academic work within this scientific area in Macedonia, with certain exceptions (Anic *et al*, 2010, Koceski and Petrevska, 2012). Additionally, the empirical investigation confirms the research hypothesis and points to crucial importance of introducing e-tools for tourism promotion. It recommends application of Internet and OSN in increasing the awareness for Macedonia as a tourist destination. Moreover, the paper may alarm the relevant tourism-actors in the country, that the time has changed and that the on-line experience has shifted from searching and consuming to creating, connecting and exchanging. Previously passive consumers and web surfers are now generating content, collaborating and commentating. So, it urges the need for identifying effective framework for mitigating the up-to-date modest tourism results, thus acting as basis for initial suggestions in improving tourism promotion of the country.

2. BACKGROUND MATERIALS

2.1. Overview on Macedonian Tourism

Macedonia identified tourism as a mean for generating various micro and macro-economic effects (Government of Macedonia, 2012a). Up-to-date, tourism has accomplished an average growth of 4.64% per year, which is higher than the average growth of the entire economy (3.12%). In this respect, the participation of tourism in the creation of the GDP has probably moderate average of 1.7 % per year, but the impression is completely opposite when compared to the average for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) of 1.6% (WTTC, 2009). With regards to the participation of tourism employees in the total workforce in Macedonia, the national average is 3.1%, which is more than twice bigger than the average of the CEE being 1.4% in 2009 (WTTC, 2009).

Furthermore, the importance of tourism to national economy can be evaluated by the tourism inflows which in 2009 represented 26% of total inflows of services and 8% of exports of goods in Macedonia. In the same line, the tourism inflows were 20% higher than the foreign direct investments. In the frames of services, tourism inflows were the second biggest item (just a little bit lower compared to the inflows of transport services), which is 1.3 times higher than the inflows of business services and 2.4 times larger than communication services inflows. Accordingly, the net tourism inflows in Macedonia have an average of 1% of GDP (Petrevska, 2010). Such condition indicates high potential to increase the tourism effects in economic activity in Macedonia.

The forecasts regarding tourism development in Macedonia are very optimistic. Namely, the estimated results are encouraging and by 2021 it is expected that the direct contribution of tourism to the GDP will reach to 1.6 % thus bringing revenue of EUR 170 mil. according to the constant 2011 prices; the total contribution of tourism to GDP will rise to 6.0%; the visitor exports are expected to generate EUR 76 mil. (5.1% of total exports); and the investment in tourism is projected to reach the level of EUR 76 mil. representing 2.8% of total investment. Additionally, it is expected that the number of employees that indirectly support the tourism industry in Macedonia will have an upward trend and will reach 35000 jobs in 2021, representing 5.4% of the total workforce (WTTC, 2011).

2.2. Competitiveness of Macedonian Tourism

The budget expenditures allocated for tourism promotion in Macedonia are very modest, though their constant every year increase. From approximately EUR 100.000 in 2005 (Government of Macedonia, 2009) to EUR 120.000 in 2011 (Government of Macedonia, 2010) and EUR 130.000 in 2012 (Government of Macedonia, 2012b). However, being ranked low on the list of the most attractive destinations for travel and tourism, illustrates the need for improvement of tourism promotion. So, Macedonia was ranked as 83rd out of 124 countries in 2007, the same position, but this time out of 130 countries in 2008 and small progress was made in 2009, i.e. Macedonia was ranked 80th out of 133 countries (Blanke and Chiesa, 2009). Finally, a slight improvement was made in 2011, when Macedonia was ranked at the 76th place out of 139 countries. However, it should be mentioned that the majority of the countries in the region are significantly better ranked than Macedonia: Slovenia - 33rd place, Croatia - 34th place, Montenegro - 36th place, Bulgaria - 48th place and Albania - 71st place (Blanke and Chiesa, 2011). Concerning the neighboring countries, only Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are ranked lower than Macedonia.

In order to strengthen tourism competitiveness of Macedonia, the first national web tourism portal (www.exploringmacedonia.com) was created in 2005 as a public-private partnership between an international donor and the Ministry of economy. In this regard,

several other private initiatives act as additional tourism portals, thus supporting country's tourism profile, like: www.travel2macedonia.com, www.go2macedonia.com, www.simplymacedonia.com, www.macedonialovesyou.com, www.mysticalmacedonia.com, www.macedonia-timeless.com etc.

2.3. Tourism and OSN

It is known that social networking is a platform, or site that focuses on building and reflecting of social networks or social relations among people, who have similar or somewhat similar interests, backgrounds or activities and share them simultaneously. Although social networking is possible in person, it is most popular on-line. In such cases, the websites are commonly used, known as on-line social networks - OSN.

Each generation has a different motivation for travel and tourism. The seniors want to be active, feel useful, and meet with other people to gain new friends (Ekerdt, 1986). The young people want to gain new skills, to be part of the community and to enjoy life. Being ICT literate, they use the technology for various purposes. As the increase in popularity of the OSN is on constant rise, young-adults are particularly interested in it. Moreover, the OSN find its application in travel and tourism purposes. It is often a case to be used for sharing travel and tourism information and experience with one another. Generally, it is used as prevalent and growing communication tool particularly for tourism promotion. The deeper information that the OSN have on each user may allow much better targeted promotion than any other site can currently provide. Table 1 presents the market share of OSN confirming the fact that parallel potential of Internet to promote tourism is now being fully recognized and exploited through web-based groups.

Table 1
Market share of OSN

Worldwide	Unique Visitors (000)	Percentage
Facebook.com	792.999	55.1
Twitter.com	167.903	11.7
LinkedIn.com	94.823	6.6
Google Plus	66.756	4.6
MySpace	61.037	4.2
Others	255.539	7.8
Total	1.438.877	100.0

Source: ComScore. http://techcrunch.com/2011/12/22/googlesplus/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Techcrunch+%28TechCrunch%29 (30 November 2011).

In short time, the Internet was introduced as a rapidly evolving medium for travel and tourism (Schonland and Williams, 1996). It successful introduction to e-tourism is fully supported by the search engines which became a dominant source in tourists' use to access particular tourism and travel products. Due to its significance, this issue raised an interest within academia and practitioners. Generally, they argue regarding the understanding how search engines work and how travellers use the Internet and booking systems as tools in e-tourism (Morrison *et al*, 2001; Pan *et al*, 2007; Buhalis and Law, 2008; Pan *et al*, 2011; Xiang and Pan, 2010). Moreover, the success of search engine marketing requires a good understanding of consumer behaviour in order to provide the information desired by different consumers. Furthermore, the necessity of developing digital technology that will support the personalized services to address individual needs is fully justified. Tourism actors should collect customer information before, during and after a visit in order to better understand consumer behaviour choices and determinants (Buhalis and O'Connor, 2005).

Some researches address different approaches dealing with variety of relationships that appeared in e-tourism. So, Weber and Roehl (1999) explored demographics between Internet users and tourists at the same time. However, little research has been done on the travel-related behaviours of Internet travellers. In this respect, Morrison *et al* (2001) found that some book travel on-line, while others go to travel agents or call the toll-free numbers of travel providers after getting travel information on-line. With regards to the behavioural dimensions, it may be utilized to segment travel markets as a powerful tool in managing e-tourism (Hennessey *et al*, 2008). Regardless the approach, it must be underlined that tourism needed this kind of information some years ago, while today we are faced with tourists with different travel patterns which cause different activity while travelling.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Hypotheses

Based on research questions stated in the introductory part, the study intends to reach the following objectives: (a) to gain an in-depth understanding of application of Internet among young-adult consumers, (b) to empirically test the application of the OSN in tourism and travel purposes and sharing experiences, and (c) to empirically test the reliability and trust in the Internet and the OSN as a promotion source among young-adults in Macedonia.

Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: The Internet plays an essential role in travel and tourism among young-adults and may be used for tourism promotion.

Hypothesis 2: The OSN are applied for sharing travel and tourism experiences by young-adults and may be used for tourism promotion.

Hypothesis 3: The Internet and the OSN enjoy trust among young-adults and may be used in tourism promotion purposes.

3.2. Research Design

The study mainly took a quantitative approach to answer the research questions. In this respect, a self-administered questionnaire survey was employed to collect the data.

The structured questionnaire used for the research consisted of three sections. Section 1 contained demographic attributes of the respondents regarding: gender, age, place of living, geographical area, marital and working status, as well as monthly household income. Section 2 contained ten items measuring the application of Internet and the OSN in travel and tourism. A 4-point Likert Scale (where 1=poor, 2=average, 3=good and 4=very good) was adopted to assess respondents' ratings. Section 3 contained five questions designed to measure young-adults' satisfaction and trust from e-tools. A 4-point semantic different scale (1=far below ideal, 2=very close to ideal, 3=better than expected and 4=very satisfied) was applied for all the satisfaction measurements perceived by the respondents.

The data were collected in three locations in Macedonia: Skopje, Stip and Gevgelija in March 2012. The subjects used were undergraduate students in tourism and gastronomy in the age group generally up to 30 years. The questionnaires were handed to students as representatives for young-adults, which were previously well informed about the survey's aims. The explanation was to avoid any attempt to manipulate the survey process and possibly bias the results. Since young people are eager to consume, as well as are conscious of their experience, they are valid consumers for this study (Sproles and Kendall, 1986).

A total of 520 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, out of which 502 were deemed complete and usable, thus having response rate of 97%. The collected data were transferred to a common scorecard database in SPSS 20.0 using descriptive statistics and nonparametric statistical tests processing. Namely, SPSS is one of the most powerful data

analysis and statistics program in social sciences (Buckingham and Saunders, 2004: 155), which receives plenty of positive feedbacks from researchers in various sectors.

The Chi-squared test was used for the testing of hypotheses. Since, the significance level was set at 5%, the variables whose mean value is above 0.05 are considered under relation oriented.

4. RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The Table 2 presents the demographic profile of respondents participated in the survey. It is noticeable almost ideal gender equality. The vast majority of the respondents are under 30 years of age. Furthermore, majority live in urban areas (81%), being single (94%) and generally come from three (out of eight) geographic regions in Macedonia (Skopje - 21%, East - 41% and South-East - 27%). Since the sample is consisted of university students, it is expected to be unemployed (93%). The monthly household income is between EUR 250 and EUR 300 (48%) presenting an average salary in Macedonia.

Table 2
Demographic profile of respondents (n = 502)

Characteristic	Valid n	Percentage
Gender		
Male	246	49.0
Female	256	51.0
Age		
< 30	484	96.4
> 30	18	3.6
Place of living		
Town	404	80.5
Village	98	19.5
Geographical area		
Skopje	103	20.5
North-East	26	5.2
East	210	41.8
South-East	137	27.3
Vardar	10	2.0
Pelagonija	4	0.8
South-West	7	2.8
Polog	5	1.0
Marital status		
Married	30	6.0
Single	472	94.0
Working status		
Employed	35	7.0
Unemployed	467	93.0
Monthly household income (EUR)		
≤ 250	133	26.5
250-300	242	48.2
> 300	127	25.3

4.2. Test of Association

4.2.1. Test of first hypothesis

For the testing of first hypothesis that there is any association between travel and tourism needs and the Internet among the young-adults, Chi-squared test was used to test the association. The research showed that the results were significant since the Pearson chi-square value is almost 0.034 which is less than the significance level 0.05. Additional data pointing significant outcomes towards the first hypothesis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Test of first hypothesis ($n = 502$)

	Value	Degree of freedom	p-value
Pearson Chi-Square	6.752	2	.034
Likelihood Ratio	6.939	2	.031
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.223	1	.013

4.2.2. Test of second hypothesis

For testing the second hypothesis that whether there exists relationship between the OSN and sharing travel and tourism experience among young population in Macedonia, the value of Chi-squared test was found 0.004 which is less than the significance level 0.05. So, the testing confirms solid causality between these two variables pointing to the fact that the OSN do affect in strong manner the young-adults in travel and tourism, provoking share of their experiences. The Table 4 presents referring data which support these outcomes towards the second hypothesis.

Table 4
Test of second hypothesis ($n = 502$)

	Value	Degree of freedom	p-value
Pearson Chi-Square	18.099	9	.004
Likelihood Ratio	21.623	9	.010
Linear-by-Linear Association	9.771	1	.002

4.2.3. Test of third hypothesis

By analogy, the third research hypothesis was tested by means of Chi-squared test. Its value was calculated toa 0.000 which is less than the significance level of 0.05. This test leads to conclusion for existing strong connection between the e-media (the Internet and the OSN) and the level of trust enjoyed by the young population. The results are summarized in the Table 5.

Table 5
Test of third hypothesis ($n = 502$)

	Value	Degree of freedom	p-value
Pearson Chi-Square	32.001	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	27.191	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	23.797	1	.000

4.3. Reliability and Validity of Data

The next step is the evaluation of the research. Different tests may be applied to reinsure the research results. Among the variety of concepts, the reliability and validity of data (Yin, 1994) are introduced in addition. The reliability is regularity and soundness of a tool used for measurement of data. It shows how much reliable is the measurement which has been adopted to measure the collected data. More precisely, the reliability tells if the repeated replications research happens the same results would be achieved. It explaines how far away

the approaches yield the same conclusion. The concept of validity is used for the measurement of quantitative data. It is described as to what extend the conclusion can reflect the accurate conclusion, leading to conclusion that the findings are valid and trustworthy. Moreover, the validity is degree to which adopted measurement tools may be helpful to measure the asked questions.

Since the researcher can adopt any method suitable for the study, the next step was Cronbach α (alpha) coefficient as a coefficient of reliability. It is commonly used as a measure of the internal consistency or reliability of a psychometric test score for a sample of examinees. The results indicated Cronbach's α for questionnaire (502 items) was 0.901 representing excellent internal consistency. Furthermore, the results pointed from good to acceptable internal consistency. So, the Cronbach α for individual variable of perceived fit was (0.857); perceived usage (0.821); sharing experiences (0.794) and the level of trust (0.846).

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This study investigated the attitude of young-adults towards application of the Internet and the OSN in tourism promotion in Macedonia. In this respect, three aspects were particularly addressed: the application of Internet for travel and tourism purposes; the usage of the OSN in sharing travel and tourism experiences, and the degree of reliability in the Internet and the OSN as tourism promotion media.

The sampling was consisted of students as representatives of young population keen on application of computer technology for travel and tourism. Through statistical analysis it was identified that generally, young-adults predominantly use the Internet as a basic source for travel and tourism information. The vast majority of respondents has a profile page on the OSN and uses it for sharing travel and tourism experiences. So, the young population in Macedonia identified the OSN as a cradle for sharing info from their trip and holiday. Additionally, both sources, the Internet and the OSN enjoy highly significant level of trust among youngsters and have been detected as a determinant for tourism promotion.

Furthermore, the study was limited by several factors that may be addressed in some future research. Because only cross-sectional data were collected through a questionnaire survey, the study may also suffer from common method variance effect. The sample size was also not big enough to verify the factor structures. Namely, the analysis took a snapshot of a selected sample in Macedonia referring university students who have generally limited travel and tourism experience. Moreover, the results address 90% of respondents coming only from three geographical areas (Skopje, East and South-East). To gain a better overview of this research area, future studies may expand the sample to include young-adult populations from other statistical planning regions in Macedonia in more equal manner. Thus, it may not be possible to generalize the results to whole young population in Macedonia. As this research represents a relatively small sample size, future work may also focus on extending the number of respondents. Also, some other aspects may be investigated in the line of mitigating tourism promotion in Macedonia. Despite these limitations, the study is reach on useful findings and pose some valuable directions for further research.

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