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INNOVATIVE APPROACHES FOR PROMOTING TOURISM IN MACEDONIA

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Abstract:

The paper argues the necessity of applying innovative approaches in meeting tourists' needs and preferences, thus acting as sophisticated tool for promoting tourism. The research investigates the case of Macedonia and attempts to justify the necessity of developing intelligent way for supporting and enhancing tourism promotion. Moreover, it poses positive impulses from introducing recommendation systems to tourism industry as a precondition for assisting tourists and travelers in identifying personal tailor-made itinerary. Additionally, the paper gives a glance on positive outcomes from such software module, particularly to small and tourism developing countries as Macedonia. Finally, this research aims to alarm relevant tourism-actors in the country, that the time has changed and that new innovative approaches must be introduced when addressing tourism promotion on national level.

Keywords: Tourism; Promotion; Recommendation system; Macedonia.

Introduction

As one of the most promising world industries, tourism is identified as source for generating numerous positive impacts, particularly to national income and economic growth. So, each country is interested in tourism development and urges measures for increasing the quantity of tourists and travelers. Yet, attracting them in a bigger number is not a trouble-free process, particularly in times of ever-changing environment. The base for increasing the number of tourists lies in capability to meet their requests and travel desires. Due to fact that their behavior is constantly changing and evolving, the introduction of the Web, as the leading source of searching information for tourism and travel purposes, is neglectable. In times of enlarged number of competitors in tourism market, tourism promotion is detected as the only way-out for differentiating.

In order to pose some innovative approaches for tourism promotion, by elaborating the case of Macedonia, the paper is structured in several parts. Section one provides a snapshot on some background materials presenting interesting facts regarding tourism in Macedonia. Section two presents highlights on literature review, while the necessity of introducing new approaches for tourism promotion of Macedonia is elaborated in Section three. The final part of the paper includes main conclusions and recommendations.

Generally, the contribution of this paper lies in the fact that enriches the poorly-developed empirical academic work within this scientific area in Macedonia, with certain exceptions (Petrevska & Koceski, 2013). Additionally, this empirical investigation recommends application of sophisticated approaches for promoting Macedonia as 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.

Background materials

Tourism has emerged as one of the major industries in the world economy. In 2011, it contributed almost EUR 4.5 trillion to the world global economy, or 9% of global gross domestic product (GDP), 100 million direct jobs and EUR 500 billion investments in tourism (WTTC, 2011).

Macedonia identified tourism as a mean for generating various micro and macro-economic effects (Government of Macedonia, 2012). 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 and 2012). 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).

Many interesting facts occur when addressing indicators concerning certain tourism statistics in Macedonia. Namely, one may note certain remarks from the list referring the most attractive destinations for travel and tourism, issued by the World Economic Forum. Many segments are within the list covering the issues of travel and tourism regulatory framework, tourism business environment and infrastructure, tourism human, cultural and natural resources etc. From the broad spectrum, the author highlights only one segment. It refers only to the tourism infrastructure index, which is a separate pillar categorized within the section business environment and infrastructure. The author makes comparison of data for 2011 and 2013, thus making solid background for tourism infrastructure supply in Macedonia. In this line, it is noted that in 2011, the score for this pillar was 3.8 thus ranking Macedonia at the 69th place out of 139 countries (Blanke & Chiesa, 2011, 256). Slight improvement is accomplished in 2013, when the score for tourism infrastructure was 4.27 thus enabling Macedonia to improve its rank at 64th place out of 140 countries (Blanke & Chiesa, 2013, 37).

Table 1. Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index for Macedonia

Year	Rank	Total number of countries
2007	83	124
2008	83	130
2009	80	133
2011	76	139
2013	75	140

Source: Author's notes based on various issues of the World Economic Forum reports.

Table 1 poses data regarding travel and tourism competitiveness index in Macedonia. Generally, one may conclude the need for more efforts in the field of improving tourism competitiveness. Despite slight improvements within the years, the progress is very modest. The vast majority of countries in the region,

this includes Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Albania, are significantly better ranked than Macedonia (Blanke and Chiesa, 2011, p. xv). 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.

Literature review

One may argue the inevitable relationship between tourists and information. Moreover, it is a widely-recognized fact that information and decision-making have become the foundation of world economy (Wang, 2008). Due to tourism essentiality, recommenders applied in tourism have been a field of study since the very beginnings of artificial intelligence. There is a large body of literature regarding the significance and effectiveness of applying the recommenders in tourism, travelling and hospitality. It is a matter of identifying a class of intelligent applications that offer recommendations to travelers, generally as a response to their queries. They mostly leverage in-built logical reasoning capability or algorithmic computational schemes to deliver their recommendation functionality. Thus, recommenders are an attempt to mathematically model and technically reproduce the process of recommendations in the real world.

Numerous researchers made efforts in their introducing. In this respect, the need for developing intelligent recommenders which can provide a list of items that fulfill as many requirements as possible is elaborated (Jannach, 2006; Mirzadeh *et al.*, 2004; McSherry, 2005). Also, a recommender dealing with a case-based reasoning is introduced in order to help tourist in defining a travel plan (Ricci & Werthner, 2002; Wallace *et al.*, 2003). Yet, as the most promising recommenders in tourism domain are the knowledge-based and conversational approaches (Ricci *et al.*, 2002; Thompson *et al.*, 2004). The knowledge-filtering, constraint-based and casebased approaches are further engaged for recommendation (Kazienko & Kolodziejcki, 2006; Ricci & Missier, 2004; Zanker *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, the recommenders based on text mining techniques between travel agent and customer through a private Web chat may easily find an application (Loh *et al.*, 2004).

Furthermore, some late research that brought more sophisticated outcomes are referred: introducing a personalized tourist information provider as a combination of an event-based system and a location-based service applied to a mobile environment (Hinze *et al.*, 2009); Investigation on sources and formats of online travel reviews and recommendations as a third-party opinions in assisting travelers in their decision making during trip planning (Zhang *et al.*, 2009); Findings regarding development of a web site in order to enable Internet users to locate their own preferred travel destinations according to their landscape preferences (Goossen *et al.*, 2009); Selecting the destination from a few exceptions (Charou *et al.*, 2010; Niaraki & Kim, 2009); Usage of orienteering problem and its extensions to model tourist trip planning problem (Vansteenkoven & Wouter, 2011); and similar. It is evidently that the research area is extending resulting in improved dependability of recommendations by certain semantic representation of social attributes of destinations (Daramola *et al.*, 2010).

Necessity of introducing new approaches for tourism promotion in Macedonia

Tourism is an interesting phenomenon particularly for recommendation purposes. Being detected as the only way out in assisting tourists and travelers to identify their ideal holiday, recommenders offer personalization of information delivery to each traveler, together with travel history. Yet, the advanced tourist information systems must offer more than just relatively static information about sights and places. Over the past two decades a noteworthy transformation was made from just passive searching and surfing to creating content, collaborating and connecting. In this respect, the Web became the leading source of information particularly important in times of increased number of competitors in tourism market. The way out is detected in application of recommenders as a promising way to differentiate a site from competitors.

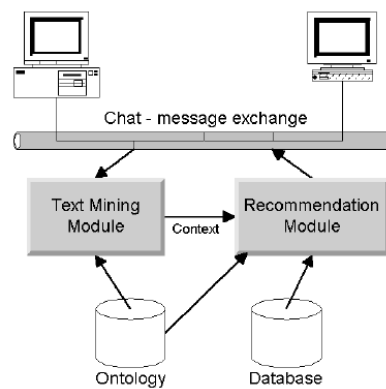


Figure 1. Architecture of decision support system (Loh *et al.*, 2004: 159)

Generally, recommendations may be made to a tourist by software, as in a multimedia totem, an ATM device, or in a Web site, or by a human intermediary (e.g., the travel agent) who will receive information from a decision support system (Figure 1). However, the most successful results may be expected by applying collaborative filtering and content-based filtering (Figure 2). Based on conversational approaches, such recommenders are promising in tourism, meaning that the user is giving opportunity to choose a quantum of tourist items with regards to personal preferences.

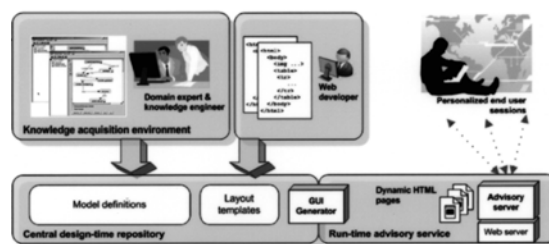


Figure 2 (Jannach *et al.*, 2009: 145)

It is more than obvious that whether a potential tourist will be interested in a certain item depends on his preferences. Although may sound fragile, but the vast majority of today's tourists know exactly what they are looking for. Yet, they are very demanding and have complex, multi-layered desires and needs. Today's so called "postmodern tourists" have specific interests and individual motives which results in tailored made tourist products according to their particular preferences. They are often high experienced in travelling and demand perfect tourism products rather than standardized ones. Consequently, they take much more active role in producing diversified tourism products with shorter life cycles enabled by increased usage of ICT.

Many researchers were interested in identifying tourists' needs, expectations and behavior. Hence, numerous papers discuss tourist roles in order to define their considerable variations. In mostly, the behavior is related to specific demographic and background characteristics emphasizing the life course as the leading component for investigating tourist role preferences. Yet, attention should be paid to a variety of social structures and processes, including psychological needs and lifecourse stage.

Despite the existence of variety and most probably, sufficient number of web-portals that promote Macedonia as tourist destination, so far none of them act as tourism recommender. Moreover, Table 2 supports the noted conclusion by giving a glance of poor visits to particular sites referred by search engines in a three-month period. Surprisingly, both web-portals labeled as national are placed at the bottom of the table.

Table 2. Traffic statistics for selected web-sites

Web-site	Traffic rank
www.macedonialovesyou.com	18.824.372
www.simplymacedonia.com	14.670.989
www.go2macedonia.com	14.010.522

www.macedonia-timeless.com	1.690.753
www.exploringmacedonia.com	1.360.389

Source: Author's note based on www.alexa.com

The forth mentioned advantages produced by recommenders fully justify the urgency and necessity of their design in Macedonia. Specifically lead from the fact that they assist tourists and visitors in planning and creating their trip and holiday in more sophisticated way.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on fact that tourism is defined as one of the most economically oriented industries in the world, it enhances and strengthens national economies. Concerning Macedonia, tourism is identified as an industry which might contribute to: enhancing foreign export demand for domestic goods and services, generating foreign currency earnings, new employment opportunities within the country, repaying the foreign debt, increasing the national income etc. Additionally, it is worth noticing that travel and tourism economy in each country incorporates broad spectrum of tourism-oriented activities and results with multiplicative impacts.

The paper presented an analytical approach of positive results in developing tourism recommendation systems, thus emphasizing the necessity for their introduction in Macedonia. Tourism recommenders may serve as a guideline for tourists and travelers in the line of identifying ideal trip and holiday. So, development of such software module may generally contribute to increasing the awareness of tourist destination that is capable of fulfilling travelers' preferences, and respectfully in raising net tourism income.

Furthermore, a successful launch of a web-based recommender at national level is in the line of supporting the economy through improvement of tourism supply in more qualitative manner. Since such portal will indicate the motives, preferences and reasons for traveling to Macedonia, it might be of high importance to all key-tourism actors in the process of identifying measures and implementing activities necessary for creating comprehensive tourism policy. Finally, the paper may alarm the relevant tourism-actors in Macedonia, that the time has changed and that on-line experience has shifted from searching and consuming to creating, connecting and exchanging.

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