

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT ON LEISURE TRAVEL: THE CASE OF THE RUSSIAN MARKET AND THE CHALLENGES FOR THE CYPRUS TOURISM INDUSTRY

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Abstract

Purpose: Web 2.0 “empowered” consumers by enabling them generate their own content through a range of devices and platforms that are easy to use even by non-specialists (Gretzel et al, 2006; Buhalis et al, 2005). Today, social media applications enjoy phenomenal success: Indicatively, Facebook, a social networking website, claimed that its active users reached 300 million, and at the same time it is estimated that there are over 200 million blogs worldwide (Qualman, 2009). Social media, defined by Richter & Koch (2007) as “online applications, platforms and media which aim to facilitate interaction, collaboration and the sharing of content”, seem to change significantly the way individuals plan and consume travel: 82% of US online consumers have checked online reviews, blogs and other online feedback for their travel related purchasing decisions (eMarketer, 2008). TripAdvisor (2009), a hotel review website, claims that it hosts over 30 million user-generated reviews and opinions, used by more than 25 million website visitors per month. It is evident that a significant number of travellers are now able to use the web, not only as recipients of information, but also as information and content creators for use by others. Social media are becoming increasingly important in tourism, since: (a) Potential tourists rely on others’ experiences for their decision making due to the experiential nature of tourism products (Litvin et al 2008; Yoo et al, 2007), thus decreasing uncertainty and increasing the exchange utility; (b) Social media enable storytelling, a usual post-travel engagement in our travel culture, on a ‘24/7’ basis, not only to a larger audience, but also provide a sense of belonging into virtual travel communities (Gretzel et al, 2006). In some instances, the content of on-line communities is perceived as similar to recommendations provided by friends, family members or even “like-minded souls” (Bray et al 2006; Fernback & Thompson, 1995; Wang et al., 2002), thus becoming vital information source to potential tourists (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). It is apparent that

social media introduced a new, complex and uncontrollable, element in consumer behaviour presenting a new challenge to both academia and marketers. A challenge magnified by the fact that the presence of social media seems that caused an increasing mistrust for the traditional marketing tactics, as well as a diminishing effect of traditional mass media. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role and impact of social media on how Russian holidaymakers plan and consume holidays, and at the same time explore if and how social media are employed, as marketing and communication tools, by the Cyprus tourism industry.

Design / Methodology / Approach: The study employs a two stage research design: The first stage (quantitative) consists of a questionnaire survey administered to MASMI's online Russian panel, consisting of approximately 400,000 members, yielding an average response rate of 15% - 20%. The second stage (qualitative) employs a number of in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders of the Cyprus tourism industry.

Anticipated Findings: The quantitative stage of the study attempts to uncover Russians' holidaymakers (a) exposure to social media before, during and after their trip; (b) level of influence that social media have on their holiday plans; and (c) level of trust / credibility towards social media, in relation to traditional sources of holiday related information. The qualitative stage of the study explores how key stakeholders from various sectors of the Cyprus tourism industry, (i.e. state & regional tourism marketing organizations, hospitality, travel trade etc) perceive the importance of social media as marketing tools, and the underlying reasons that contribute to either non acceptance, or acceptance and use, of social media as part of their organization's communication tools.

Originality / Value: The originality of this study is on the fact that it attempts to uncover the impact of a whole range of social media on various stages of the holiday travel planning behaviour, but also on the during and post trip stages. Moreover, it addresses the issue of how the tourism industry of a specific country responds to the new reality imposed by social media impact on holiday related consumer behaviour.

Practical implications: Research findings provide to tourism marketers and tourism stakeholders an understanding of social media influence and impact on the various stages of holidaymakers' travel planning behaviour. Therefore, the findings enable them to fine-tune their organization's marketing strategies and tactics, thus increasing effectiveness and efficiency of marketing campaigns. The specific context of the study, given that Russia is Cyprus' (a) second most important incoming holiday market, and (b) most promising market in terms of per capita tourism receipts, adds significantly to the practical implications of the study to the local tourism industry.

Keywords: Social media; consumer behaviour; travel; tourism; Cyprus; Russia

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