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## Strategic Marketing Communication in Pilgrimage Tourism

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### Abstract

The paper discusses the pilgrimage tourism as one of the oldest forms of tourism. Although it is often considered as marginal, the pilgrimage tourism is indeed one of the most widespread forms of tourism. Due to the historical context all the necessary prerequisites for the use of its potential are developed in Slovakia. There is a large amount of destinations and sites that are by their nature or historical value of interest for domestic and foreign visitors. Visitors from all over the world participating in significant pilgrimages bounded to these destinations. However deficiencies in marketing communication, infrastructure and other areas hinder the development of pilgrimage and religious tourism in Slovakia. To determine the current state of marketing communications in pilgrimage tourism questionnaire survey was conducted. In achieving the purpose of the research, two hypotheses were formulated. Because, the relationship between a dependent variable was examined, and the interval variable is one, Single Factor Analysis of Variance ANOVA was used. Homogeneity of variance was verified using Bartlett's and Levene's test. Recommendations for the development of communications strategy are formulated based on the results of the analysis.

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*Keywords:* Social media; tourism; destination; marketing; strategy; pilgrimage

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### 1. Introduction

Religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites since time immemorial attracted the number of visitors. Interest in this type of tourism in many countries constitutes an important component of tourism, and the state budget provides by considerable funding.

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Religious tourism focuses on the visitation of religious sites or destinations, in order to consolidate a particular faith, and development of identity that refers to spiritual or religious enlightenment. These places attract the attention of visitors, not only for religious reasons, but also in terms of history, architecture or artistic value (Kavoura, 2013).

Most religious monuments can attract visitors who may not have a religious affiliation. Some visitors are motivated to visit religious destinations because of their religious belief, religious monuments of architectural attraction, interest in their historical value, or all at once (Kot & Ślusarczyk, 2014).

Religious and pilgrimage tourism is closely bounded to destination. In this context, to remain sustainable, the monuments and natural sites must be protected and restored in order to prevent congestion and not exceed load capacities. The management of these destinations should assure a development of sustainable local economies and respect for the traditions and customs of the host populations (Kiráľová & Straka, 2013).

Tourism motivated by religious or spiritual reasons or associated with religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites was previously a largely domestic phenomenon (Štefko, Jenčová & Litavcová, 2013; Kavoura & Katsoni, 2014). This form of tourism holds an immense potential for promotion of interfaith and intercultural communications, and promoting and preserving cultural diversity.

Globalization, economic liberalization, a new ethnicity and religious policy, commodification, commoditization of culture and values affect and shape many religious sites in the today world (Owens, 2002). Religious tourism has turned into a major international commercial service. Visitors can buy multifaith-journey packages to places of worship, sacred destinations and pilgrimage sites associated with the mainstream faiths. The use of religious heritage becomes often controversial by the context of commercialization of spirituality. Religious tourism is today a dynamic multi-billion dollar global industry with more than 330 million visitors and more than 50,000 churches and religious organizations that host travel programs. People of faith have changed their spending habits, and today purchase first-class products and services. The annual turnover of these activities amounts to more than \$ 18 billion. Pilgrimages also witnessed a dramatic increase around the world. Vatican itself reported 5.5 million visitors in 2013. Tourism of believers has not changed even in times of crisis (Kiráľová, 2010).

Due to the historical context all the necessary prerequisites for the use of religious and pilgrimage tourism's potential are developed in Slovakia. To determine the current state of marketing communications in pilgrimage tourism questionnaire survey was conducted.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1 *Tourism, religion and pilgrimage*

UNWTO considers religious tourism as visiting sacred places of a particular religion, associated with performing certain religious rites (worship, religious meetings, and the celebration of certain events). The same semantic content as religious tourism has a pilgrimage tourism, i.e. travelling to visit the sacred place at a time when specific religious event takes place there. Pilgrimage tourism is considered part of religious tourism. UNWTO ranks the religious tourism to fifth place among motivations to travel.

The overlap between the spiritual and religious travel is illustrated through the work of Jackowski, (1987), McGettigan (2003), and Tilson, (2005) who viewed spiritual tourism as a niche form of religious tourism. Spiritual tourism aims to explore the elements of life that are beyond one's perception and help to balance the body-mind and spirit. It may or may not be related to religion. Visitors are trying to develop their own spirituality, or discover the spirituality of others.

Tourism and pilgrimage are closely related (MacCannell, 1999; Cohen, 1979; Turner & Turner, 1978; Campo, 1998; Timothy & Boyd 2003), and, according to Cohen, in modern mass-pilgrimage the behaviour of pilgrims is often indistinguishable from that of tourists. Tourists are not necessarily affiliated with any religion, and they do not necessarily visit the pilgrimage site for the same reasons as pilgrims, but some scholars argue that modern tourism is the contemporary expression of the traditional religious pilgrimage (Graburn, 1989; MacCannell, 1973; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). As stated by Vukonić (1996) though the pilgrimage is motivated by religion, it still has characteristics which are not motivated by religion. The secular aspects of pilgrimage (finding accommodation, organizing the trip, food, eating and healthcare) are the same as of the modern tourism. Turner & Turner (1978) also argue that both pilgrimage and tourism encompass a journey using modern means of transportation.

The modern pilgrimage is not necessarily motivated by religion. On the contrary to traditional search for

identity, spiritual quest or divine experiences (Osterreith, 1997), today pilgrimage is also about historical and cultural behaviours, meanings and pious intentions (Eade & Sallnow, 1991), cultural, spiritual, athletic, and personal reasons (Frey, 2004) and is based on the search of embodied ideals (Morinis, 1992; Gladstone, 2005; Zhang, 2007).

Regular pilgrimages that attract hundreds to thousands of believers to certain destinations and sites have undoubtedly economic importance. On the one hand, it is a general obligation of the municipal authorities for example to provide parking areas, organizers, regulate traffic, to establish rules for stall sales, maintain access roads (as a place of pilgrimage is in the rural site), to coordinate medical and security service. Thousands of pilgrims, in addition to the main goal of pilgrimages, consume goods and services including accommodation. This income remains in the destination and is also a considerable multiplier effect these initial expenses. Religious tourism is less susceptible to economic fluctuations in the market. Because believers are engaged visitors, they prepare their journey in advance, and travel regardless of the current economic situation (Lickorish & Jenkins, 2013). Believers, who travel because of their faith, often takes a travel as part of their religious obligations, or as the fulfilment of a spiritual mission. There is a presumption that by the right approach the size of this market could double in 2020. Such an increase is possible because one of the specificities of religious travellers is that people in faith travel in groups of 40-45 rather than individually (Tourismandmore.com, 2009).

## *2.2 Strategic Communication in Tourism*

Communication with visitors is related to the requirement to inform them of the destination and product offered. Creating an attractive product, pricing it by reasonable price and access to the tourism market is not enough. Visitors must be informed and motivated so that they began to be interested in the destination. The basic objective of the communication is, therefore, creating a demand for the destination (Királ'ová, 1995).

The use of marketing tools is a continuous process in which it is necessary to monitor new trends and be able to respond flexibly to changes (Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders & Wong, 2002). Correct and timely response can gain a competitive advantage. Strategically necessary is optimal selection of communication channels (Štefko, 2003). Optimal mix of marketing communication tools is strategically important for developing long-time relationship with target groups.

Strategic communication in religious and pilgrimage tourism involves connection and optimally also an interaction between visitors and destinations (Sujova, A. & Rajnoha, R., 2012). It can raise awareness and persuades visitors to purchase and re-purchase the product (Scott 2008; Iyer, Soberman & Villas-Boas 2005; Buhalis 2000).

Today visitors want creative, interactive communication; they want to develop relationships with the destination. The success of the destination lies in its ability to listening to visitors, finding their motives for a visit. The perfect tool for such communication is the internet. Application of interactive marketing communications in the destination is particularly evident in relation to the changes in behaviour of visitors (Királ'ová & Straka, 2013). Religious visitors require a personalized approach, intelligent communication and empathy. Interactive communication is a prerequisite of establishing good relationships with visitors and the satisfaction of both sides. Relationship marketing is effective especially when applied to specific target group (Wang 2008; Fyall, Callod & Edwards, 2003; Buhalis 2000; Oppermann 2000).

Communication in religious and pilgrimage tourism is target communication as it focuses on a specific group of visitors that are interested in product (Zouni & Kouremenos 2008; Iyer, Soberman & Villas-Boas, 2005). The attention of people of faith has been already attracted. Destinations should focus on the message that should be different from that communicated to visitors. The best possibility to deliver the message should be the internet, social media and mobile applications that enable cost-effective communication and can encourage word-of-mouth advertising (Fedorko & Bačik, 2012). Word-of-mouth advertising is a verbal communication between providers, independent experts, family and friends and the visitor (Ennew, Banerjee & Li, 2000). Blog sites with stories about visit of religion, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites, or special events can be supported. In order to motivate a travel, the blog content must be in details so that the reader visualise the journey and start to prepare his/her own one. Web site can also offer a virtual tour to the worshiped destination and site.

International web for religious people, religious television channels, and radio stations can disseminate messages to visitors. Periodicals published by church, brochures and travel guides, as well as public relations, should be used for communication purposes and to foster a desire (Ateljević & Doorne, 2002).

### 3. Methodology

One of the basic reasons, why Slovakia cannot adequately utilize its potential in religious and pilgrimage tourism, is the lack of promotion, which implies the subsequent lack of awareness of the destinations and sites. The consequences of this are reflected in the low number of visitors. A questionnaire survey was conducted to determine the current state of research. The research has concerned to visit rate, level of awareness and interest to visit, cultural, heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites in Prešov region in the future, covered the period from April to May 2014. Four hundred thirty-three respondents answered the survey, including 244 women and 189 men.

In order to fulfil the objectives of the research, two-research hypotheses were formulated.

H1: Existence of statistically significant differences in the level of awareness of religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage sites depending on the preferred source for obtaining information is assumed.

H2: It is assumed that perception of overall satisfaction with the level of provided information about religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites statistically significantly correlates with their visit rate.

For the processing and evaluation of the data obtained and for verifying the hypotheses the Minitab® 16 Statistical Software was used. For finalizing and adjustment of the results, Microsoft Excel 2007 was used.

In achieving the purpose of the research, two hypotheses were formulated, the relationship between a dependent variable was examined, and the Single Factor Analysis of Variance ANOVA was used. Homogeneity of variance was verified using Bartlett's and Levene's test. Recommendations for the development of communications strategy are formulated based on the results of the analysis.

### 4. Calculation

The religious travel market has traditionally been driven by pilgrimages and missionary travel but over the past ten years, the market has broadened significantly. Nowadays, people of faith visit religious events and conferences, travel on faith-based cruises, faith-based safaris, doing volunteerism, visit and stay in monasteries and ashrams, stay in faith-based camps, or visit religious tourist attractions.

According to a Menlo Consulting Group/Globus study (Saltzman, 2010), 60% of religious travellers are well-educated, more than half have a household income of more than \$75,000, and 70% are married. About one-third of each age group surveyed (18-34, 35-54 and 55+) have expressed an interest in taking a spiritual vacation. The religious travel market includes Christian, Jewish and Muslim travel and to a smaller extent Buddhists, Yoga practitioners and other spiritual disciplines and faiths. Within these broad religious groupings, there are more specific markets.

About 75% of people interested in religious vacations want to delve deeper into their faiths, with others who share their interests. Most of the respondents stated that they were looking for vacations filled with a balance of religious and non-religious exploration, such as shopping or entertainment. The survey also showed that people in faith require first-class service and amenities. Religious vacation mostly ranges from 5 to 14 days (Saltzman, 2010).

Pilgrimages to the Holy Land, short-term volunteer missions to natural-disaster zones and poverty-stricken areas remain mainstays of faith-based travel. Churches are developing travel programs to tie members closer together. Religious attractions in the USA such as Sight & Sound Theatre attracts 800,000 visitors a year while the Holy Land Experience and Focus on the Family Welcome Center each receives about 250,000 guests annually. While most faith-based journeys are still arranged by small organizations, mainstream operators are now more involved than ever. The major group tour operators in the USA launched a religious tour division in 2005 (Bly, 2008).

The modern religious tourism does not have a long tradition in Slovakia due to the suspended conditions for its implementation during totality. The change occurs after the fall of the former regime, after November 1989, when persecution of churches ended, and the borders with Western Europe opened (Jancura, 2010).

According to data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (Juhaščíková, Škápík & Štukovská, 2011), the most numerous registered churches in Slovakia are The Roman Catholic Church in the Slovak Republic (62%, i.e. 3,347,277), Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in Slovakia (5.9%, i.e. 316,250), Byzantine Catholic Church in Slovakia (3.8%, i.e. 206,871), Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia (1.8%, i.e. 98,797), and the Orthodox Church (0.9%, i.e. 49133).

The boom of Marian pilgrimage sites in Slovakia was particularly marked in the 17th and 19th centuries. Pilgrimage sites based on the apparitions of the Virgin Mary arose only occasionally. Currently, Slovakia has over

55 places of pilgrimage, of which eight are of the Greek or Byzantine origin (Dromedar.sk, 2009). In Prešov region there are the city of Prešov, Levoča, Gaboltov, Stropkov, Veľký Šariš, Lutina, Litmanová, Šašová and many more.

Pilgrimage in Slovakia is usually held on the occasion of Marian feasts in the summer months of July, August and September. The most frequent pilgrimages are to the memory of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (July 16), Assumption Day (August 15), the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (September 8), and the Virgin Mary, patron saint of Slovakia (September 15).

Some of the pilgrimage sites in Slovakia have even transnational significance. The most famous is the Marian Hill in Levoča. The first pilgrimage took place here in the 13th century. The estimated number of visitors this year was over one million (Maťaš, 2014). Other important pilgrimages are held in Šaštín-Stráže; thousands of pilgrims visit Staré Hory, and Marianka, which is the oldest pilgrimage site in Slovakia. Significant pilgrimage is held annually on the Nitra Calvary and Turzovka. The main Greek Catholic pilgrimage is held annually in Lutina.

Slovakia has many interesting religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites, but their potential for tourism is not sufficiently utilized. The main reason for this situation is that many of these destinations and sites are not known due insufficient marketing. The lack of infrastructure and supplementary services are other reasons of low-visitor numbers (Huttmanová & Synčáková, 2009). To travel to worshiped destinations and site visitor do not use travel agencies frequently; tours to domestic pilgrimage places are mostly organized by individual parish and religious communities (Jancura, 2010).

The potential of religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites, is however, certainly not fully exploited. One of the main reasons of this state relates to insufficient marketing strategic communication.

## 5. Results and Discussion

Strategic marketing communication is an important part of the strategy of each religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destination and site. Many of interesting destinations and sites are not visited solely because they do not pay attention to strategic marketing communications. Religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites can use various communications when communicated with the target market. Each segment of the market obtains information from more sources; information is one of the basic prerequisites for a visit to destination or site. In this context the differences between the source of information and the level of awareness of the cultural, historical and pilgrimage destinations and sites was examined. The first hypothesis was formulated as follows. H1: Existence of statistically significant differences in the level of awareness of religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage sites depending on the preferred source for obtaining information is assumed.

Independent variable was defined as the most frequent source of obtaining information about the tourist destination (1 – Internet, 2 – travel agencies, 3 – personal recommendations from acquaintances, 4 – television / radio, 5 – newspapers / magazines).

Dependent variable was defined as the level of awareness of religious; cultural heritage and pilgrimage sites (on 1 – 5 scales, where 1 = completely uninformed, 5 = completely informed).

Given that the relation between the dependent variable and the nominal interval variable was examined, use of the Single Factor Analysis of Variance ANOVA was assumed. In the first step, the sample was divided into groups depending on the primary source of obtaining information. Observations within those groups were independent, which was a prerequisite for the fulfilment of one of the conditions of use of this analysis. Consequently, homogeneity of variance was verified using Bartlett's and Levene's test. The summary of statistics was acquired by means of the Minitab® 16 Statistical Software.

Test criterion for Levene's and Bartlett's test of homogeneity of variance was calculated at a level which held on p-values greater than the significance level at which the testing was carried out (i.e.  $\alpha = 0.05$ , or 5% respectively). Accordingly, it is possible to confirm the homogeneity of variance and proceed to the descriptive statistics for the monitored group.

The highest median was evaluated by measuring the information identified in the group of respondents who indicated that their most frequently used source of information was television or radio. The lowest median was identified by respondents who used the Internet to gather information. Standard deviation is the highest among respondents whose source of information were newspapers / magazines, lowest among respondents who acquire information through the Internet and television / radio. The following summary report presents the results of

calculations when comparisons of responses from the individually surveyed categories of respondents. Comparisons were carried out by means of the Single Factor Analysis of Variance ANOVA.

Test criterion for ANOVA was calculated at 10.76. F-criterion is granted under the significance level at which testing was carried out, the p-value of less than 0.05. The "source of information" factor significantly affects the rate of awareness of religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage sites and destinations. An internal comparison of the results was carried out in detail.

The results of the statistical analysis demonstrate that a statistically significant difference was found only between the respondents who obtain information primarily from the Internet and those who gain it by means of television or radio. The respondents who obtain necessary information primarily from television or radio did a more positive statistical significant evaluation of the level of awareness of destinations than those who gain information primarily from the Internet. There was no statistical significance detected between the other respondents groups.

In the second part of the research the link between the overall level of satisfaction with the information provided on the religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites and the visit rate has been examined. The second hypothesis was defined as follows.

H2: It is assumed that perception of overall satisfaction with the level of provided information about religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites statistically significantly correlates with their visit rate.

The Independent variable was defined as religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites visit rate (3 – yes multiple times, 2 – yes once, 1 – no).

The dependent variable was defined as the level of awareness of religious; cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites (on 1 – 5 scales, where 1 = completely uninformed, 5 = completely informed).

The sample was divided into groups on the basis of the visit rate of religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites. Observations within groups were independent, which was a prerequisite for the fulfilment of one of the conditions of utilizing the Single Factor Analysis of Variance ANOVA. In the next step, homogeneity of variance was verified by means of two tests, particularly Bartlett's test and Levene's test. The resulting summary of statistics was given by means of the Minitab® 16 Statistical Software.

P-values for Bartlett's and Levene's test of homogeneity of variance were calculated as follows:  $PB = 0.687$ ,  $\mu = 0.574$ . P-values are greater than the significance level at which the testing was carried out (i.e.  $\alpha = 0.05$ , respectively 5%). The homogeneity of variance may be, therefore, confirmed and followed by the descriptive statistics for the monitored group.

The highest median was evaluated by measuring the information identified in the group of respondents who visited the religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites more than once. The lowest median was identified by respondents who do not visit these places at all. The variance of all three groups was comparable. The hypothesis verification was performed by using ANOVA. The summary contains results calculated for the monitored variables using the Single Factor Analysis of Variance ANOVA.

Test criterion for ANOVA was calculated at 70.94. F-criterion is granted under the significance level at which the testing was conducted, the p-value of less than 0.05. The "visit rate for religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites" factor significantly affects the level of awareness of religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites. A detailed internal comparison of results was conducted.

Differences in medians indicate that the more the respondents visit religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites, the more well-informed they feel. However, the statistical analysis demonstrated that a statistically significant difference was found only between the respondents who visited such sites multiple times and those who do not visit them at all in favour of the formerly mentioned. There was no statistical significance detected between the other respondent's groups.

## 6. Conclusion

Globalization increases the level of competition also in religious and pilgrimage tourism that became an important tourism business. Especially less-known destinations and sites in Slovakia should use all the suitable marketing tools to communicate with visitors including internet communications. Limited financial resources on both destinations and visitors side in Slovakia and the availability and relatively low cost of Internet predetermine this medium to become dominant in strategic interactive communication with visitors.

Increase the awareness of religious and pilgrimage sites should be a priority in the coming years for Prešov region. Religious and public educational institutions should play important role in this process. Also municipalities responsible for tourism a regional development should coordinate this process. Collaboration and partnership between church, regional tourism organization and destination management organizations are crucial to reach this goal. For this purpose, all suitable communication channels should be used. Previous attempts to promote religious and pilgrimage sites were performed before by the separate activities and there was no systematic approach.

Based on the results of testing the hypothesis H1, the strategic communication should focus on increasing awareness, strengthening the image, targeting specific market and global publicity of the religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites in Prešov region.

In relation to the results of testing, hypothesis H2, building of comprehensive information, and information about the historical implications, events, interesting details and attractiveness directly in visited sites and destinations should be part of strategic communication.

The most appropriate for this purpose is Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest and Foursquare. Communication with visitors through the increasingly popular social network Foursquare opens new possibilities for destinations and sites. Foursquare is mainly used as an application on mobile phones and is connected with geolocation services. It is increasingly used in Slovakia to share location with friends who are also logged on the network. Webmasters of religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites should set up their venue. The venue ownership enables them access to statistics and, inter alia, gives the possibility of promotions, rewards visitors and the like. Users who visit these venues and tag themselves automatically notify their friends where they are, and thus the information about the destination and site reaches even those who, in some circumstances, could not be interested in a destination.

Strategic communication is a complicated task. Religious, cultural heritage and pilgrimage destinations and sites should allocate enough resources to promote themselves on-line and off-line, using social media. Creativity and innovation hand in hand with understanding of social media are factors determining the success of strategic communication. Offering relevant and appropriate information on the destination, monitoring and managing conversations within the social network and building relationship with visitors are steps religious, cultural heritage, and pilgrimage destinations and sites in Prešov region should do towards the visitors' loyalty.

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