THE ETHICS OF ONLINE TOURISTIC COUNSELLING: A MATTER OF USERS SATISFACTION

Gabriel Cristian Sabou[1]*, Puiu Nistoreanu[2] and Denisa Vlad[3]
[1) 2) 3) The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

Abstract

The large expansion of internet popularity affected, tough in different degrees, almost all sectors of life. Tourism makes no exception, the travel agencies being nowadays confronted with the necessity of keeping the pace with the new technology. Airline companies - and the transport companies in general, oriented by these changes, created online divisions specialized in direct sales towards the final consumer. Thus, many traditional travel agencies were determined to move their activities in the virtual space, partially or totally. Abundant online information communicated by tourism agencies or simple people sharing their experiences about tourism destinations all over the world made changes in consumer behaviour. Many reviews are objective, but in the same time many are written in order to denigrate the competition and others are written by special people hired especially for promoting some resorts or hotels on travel blogs. A great number of companies from various sectors of economy prefer this type of advertising because it is very efficient and involves less financial resources than other forms of promotion. In tourism sector as well, managers often hire specialized personnel, recognized and credible in online environment, for posting positive reviews and comments on different sites or blogs in order to create notoriety and a better image of the touristic services offered. Hence, in order to identify the way tourists perceive the influence of online counselling when deciding for a touristic package or a touristic destination, a quantitative research has been deployed for this purpose, its results being presented in the current paper. Thus, as the analysis shows, despite the large use of Internet when getting informed about a future trip, users are aware that reviews and advices posted online are not very objective.

Keywords: tourism, internet, ethics, online counselling, travel agencies, marketing

JEL Classification: L83, L86, M31, M37

Introduction

Numerous factors influence customer's choices for touristic destinations, such as the advertising campaigns the destination countries run globally, travel agencies offers, transport type and price, movies or TV programs, personal preferences etc. (Lin and Huang, 2006). Internet offers added value to every tourism agency present in online environment, through applications that help users better see the information they search about a specific

---
* Corresponding author, **Gabriel Cristian Sabou** – gabriel.sabou@yahoo.com

destination and through applications that make the booking system more efficient and easy. Meeting customers' demands faster and better, means a higher market penetration. (Law, Leung and Wong, 2004).

Often, once returned from the various chosen destinations, tourists share their opinions on blogs or to join different online discussion groups giving feedbacks and presenting their own travelling impressions. This information posted by tourists who share their personal experience about the travels they made becomes visible and influential in respect to other people's possible touristic choices (Di Pietro, Di Virgilio and Pantano, 2012). In order to have a clear image of what they look for and to make the best decision, consumers nowadays search online for gathering information before making a choice. Despite the fact that opinions shared by consumers in the virtual space are subjective, people are prone to be influenced by these (Onete and Popescu, 2010). Thus, the freedom of the virtual space may allow tourism businesses (travel agencies, hotels, transport companies etc.), to falsely claim on different websites, on discussion forums or on blogs that they are mere tourists and to describe their so-called "experience" in a manner favourable to the company, exaggerating the reality. Also, through these techniques, the same false tourist (in fact a company) may display negative feedback about its competitors.

The current paper, starting from the literature review about Internet applications and their use for promoting touristic destinations, continues with discussing about the ethics of online counselling provided through websites, forums, social networks and blogs in choosing a touristic destination. Further on, the paper presents the results of a research designed for identifying the influence of online posted information upon tourists' choices for a travelling destination.

1. Review of the scientific literature

As part of Internet, touristic blogs are special sites created and used in order to describe destinations, hotels, resorts etc. The word "blog" was first used in 1999 by Peter Merholz and "blogging" has begun developing since 2004, known as "the year of blog, since the word was the most searched for definition in a number of online dictionaries in that year" (Mack, Blose and Pan, 2008). The profile of blog creators seems to be mostly male (57%), young (48% under 30 years old), people who use internet most of their time, well-educated and having a higher income (Perlmutter and McDaniel, 2005).

Blogging has transformed the way in which information and knowledge are shared. As recent researches show, 60% of people choose the internet when they need to know something or when they search for different problems or issues, only 25% turn to traditional media and even less to libraries or other sources (Australian Tourism Data Warehouse, 2011). From another perspective, blogs are perceived as an extraordinary market research tool, providing an unlimited source of up-to-the-minute information, which indicates everything that the world thinks, discusses, encourages or bans. Blogs get indexed by search engines like Google, for example, but they may have their own search engines. When creating a blog, the most important thing one should keep in mind is that the content rules. The blogging strategy should always be implemented with the reader in mind. The blog posts have always success when they are concise, relevant, informative and very well written.

The concept of online tourism refers to a very large domain, including here online booking, information regarding hotels, airlines, holiday destinations, special resorts, online forums, blogs and also consumer-to-consumer exchanges (Mack, Blose and Pan, 2008). But as the variety of this increases day by day, the quality of information may not always be the one expected, given the facts presented above and also, considering the fact that people who post reviews and who read the information posted online belong to all types of social categories, cultures and have different educational and psychological background.

The greatest problem that arises when dealing with blogs, forums and specialized websites is whether consumers do trust in information read there and whether this information is real or not (Sparks, Perkins and Buckley, 2013; Chen, Shang and Li, 2014). Social media allows organizations to easily build their image according to their will in the virtual space (Kasavana, 2010; Lee, Tyrrell and Erdem, 2013), hence those, following their own interests, post reviews on different sites or blogs and they artificially increase the credibility of the product or the service they talk about. According to statistics published in specialized magazines, 87% of online shoppers buy products having positive reviews and 80% of them give up if that product has negative reviews. Moreover, others' opinions influence them more than experts' opinions or technical articles, as discovered by researchers from Cone Communications (Cone Online Influence Trend Tracker, 2011).

Sometimes, companies prefer to externalize this service and hire some special firms having a few employees well-trained for writing reviews. Marketing managers usually prefer this because it is an efficient and a cheaper way to promote their product or service. But how do people know if a review is real or not? How do people know how to make the difference between a true and a false review? First, one should pay attention to the language: exaggerated praise, many details or lack of details, exact details or many technical details, neologisms - all of these are strong arguments in order to consider the review as a false one.

Tourists usually travel for pleasure, but there are also other motivations that can make them choose a special destination. Some tourists want excitement and exploring something new, others want just to escape from the daily routine or they may be searching only social interaction. No matter what motivation they have, Internet helps them greatly in taking the best decision when choosing their travel destination. As Egger and Buhalis say, eTourism is evolving so quickly that the tourism sector is "constantly redefining itself and requires continual reorientation in marketing and management along the way" (Egger and Buhalis, 2008).

2. Methodology of research

The main objective of this research was to identify the way information coming from virtual domain may influence the choice of a touristic destination. As such, the research objectives are:

- To find out the tourists' opinions about online counselling when planning a travel towards a touristic destination.
- The credibility of online information about a touristic destination.
- The influence of online counselling and feedback upon tourists choice for a possible touristic destination.

The research, questionnaire based, was applied in 2013 at Romanian Tourism Fair. The questionnaire had 14 questions and the answers were recorded with the help of interview operator. The sampling method was a non-probability one, with rational selection, as the interview operator chose the respondents who fulfilled age criteria, namely persons with age between 18 and 45 years as, according to researches, this segment of population is most actively in online environment. Because the method of sample is non-probability, the error of the sample is not predictable. 139 persons of both genders (43.17% male and 57.83% female) were interviewed. 23.74% of them had post-university studies, 49.64% graduated university and 26.62% graduated high school.

3. Results and discussions

Participants to this survey stated that, usually, the main purpose of their travelling is leisure (38%), visiting new places (33.67%), cultural issues (10.67%), business (9.33%), studies (4.33%) and other reasons (4%). Almost all participants (95.68%) have declared that they have at least one touristic tour in a year (Figure no. 1).
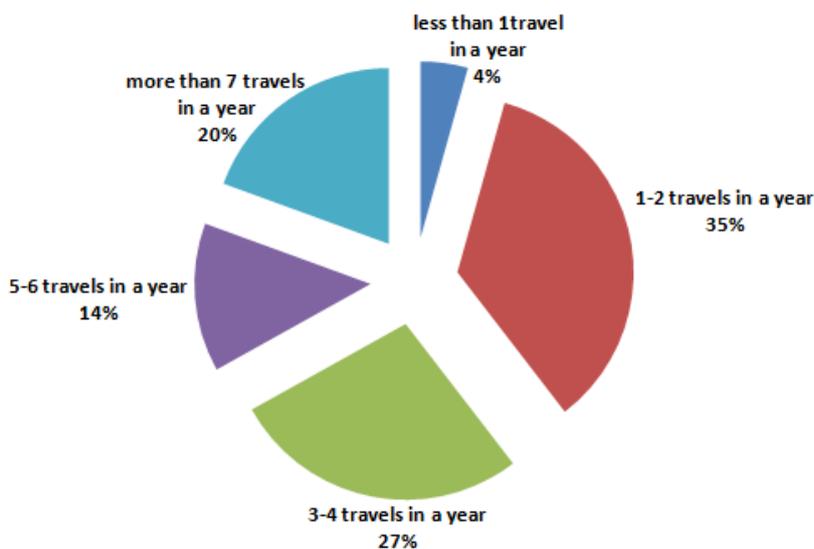
Figure no.1: The average frequency of respondents' touristic travels in a year
Source: Authors, according to research data

After finding out the frequency of respondents touristic travels in a year, it was important to find out what main sources of information are used for getting familiar with a possible touristic destination. Respondents were asked to point out all sources of information they usually use when choosing a touristic destination and the results from Figure nr. 2 reflect that.

It can be remarked that almost two thirds of the interviewed persons consult their friends and acquaintances to find out information about various touristic locations. Similarly, about two thirds of respondents stated that specialized websites are consulted before choosing a touristic destination.
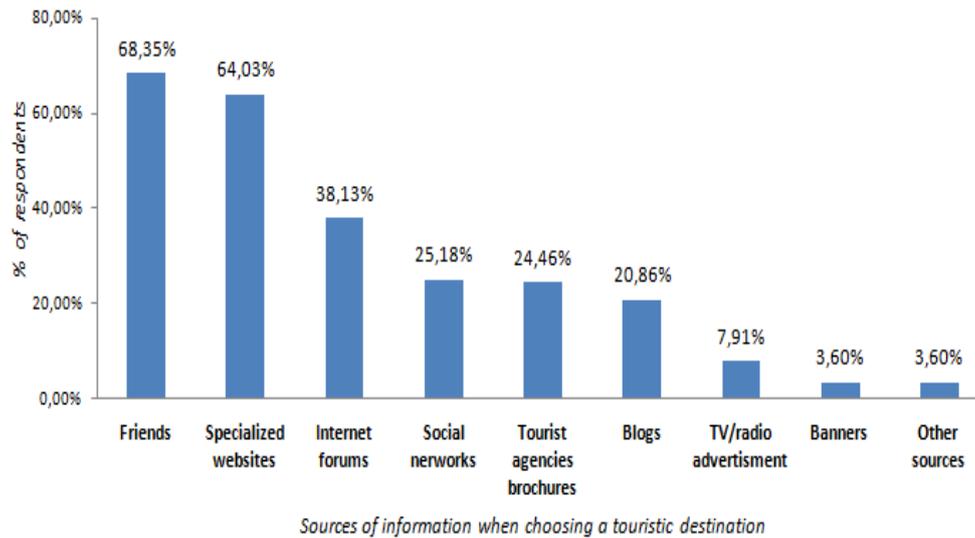
**Figure no. 2: The use of various sources of information
when choosing a touristic destination**
Source: Authors, according to research data

As it is noticed, the brochures containing tourist agencies' offers are sources of information only for a quarter of respondents (24.46%), while the other traditional sources of information about a touristic location – such television, radio, advertising banners, are even less used. Those respondents who chose "other sources" option, mentioned these to be travelling guides and video file sharing platforms such as YouTube.

Analysing the answers has shown that 116 respondents (83.45%) chose at least one of the Internet platforms (specialized websites, blogs, social networks or forums) as source of information important for their further choice of a touristic destination. This result is consistent with a similar research performed by Marin Pantelescu and Ioncica (2012) which indicated that in 2012 about 61% of their interviewed sample considered Internet as influencing their choices for a touristic destination. The difference registered between the two years (2012 and 2014) may be justified by the unquantifiable samples errors; however, another explanation might be the constant growth of Internet use globally over the last decades (Internet Live Stats, 2014).

To find out the preferred options for organizing their touristic tours, respondents were asked to indicate all that are applicable to them. Thus, a respondent was able to point out one or several means usually used for organizing a trip. The answers to this question confirm the previous results, specifically that Internet is a very good source of information which determines the majority (62.59%) to organize a trip by themselves (Figure no. 3).
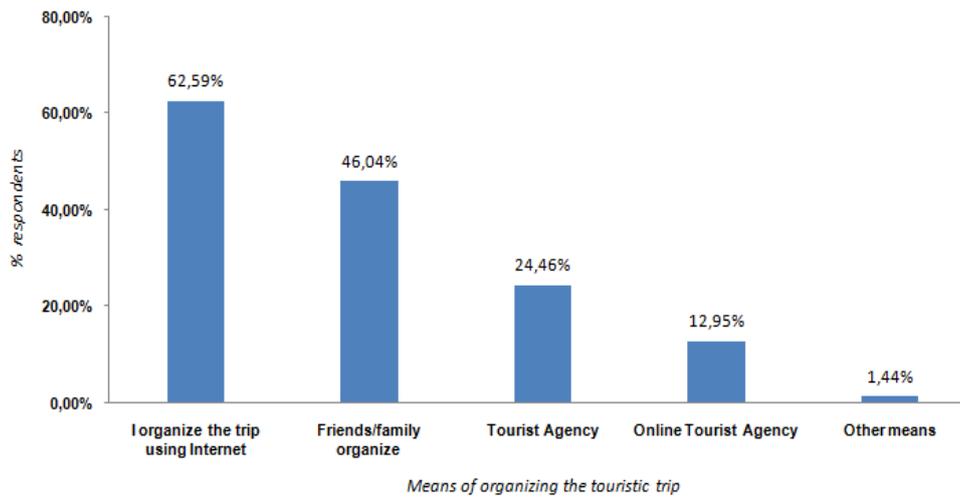
Figure no. 3: Respondents' preferences for organizing the touristic trip
Source: Authors, according to research data

Usually going into a trip arranged by friends or family is an option chosen by almost half of respondents. Similar to results presented before, the choice of the traditional tourist agency offering organized touristic packages is mentioned only by a quarter of respondents (24.46%). An even smaller number of persons (approximately 13%) declared they chose an online tourist agency for organizing their trip and 1.44% mentioned as other means: invitation to participate to various sport or business events already including an organized plan of travelling and visiting. Further on an association test was run among respondents preference for organizing the trips by themselves with the help of Internet applications and respondents' incomes. The results showed that there was no association between these two variables taken into account.

Surprisingly, although many respondents get informed on Internet and prefer to organize their touristic travel by themselves, by accessing the various applications and platforms of Internet, the online counselling (coming from online specialists debating on various websites, forums or blogs) is not considered the best.

In Figure no. 4 there are presented subjects' evaluations, as they were asked to compare the value of traditional tourist agency counselling with that received online. Despite the little use of traditional travel agencies as sources of information, 41.73% or respondents consider that these provide the same value counselling with online counselling, while almost one third of respondents consider that the information they receive from traditional tourism agencies is more useful in general than online recommendations.
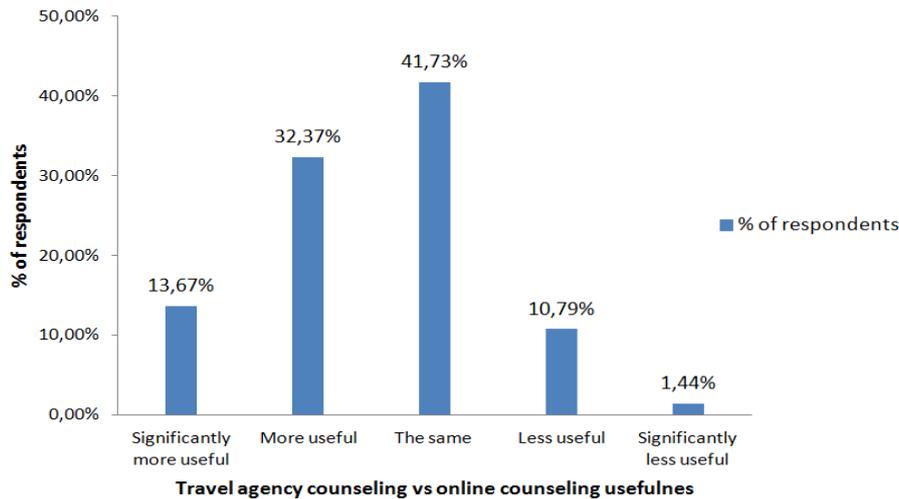
Figure no.4: The value of traditional travel agency counselling vs. online counselling
Source: Authors, according to research data

The fact that online sources of information are not very useful and accurate results from the fact that only 5.04% of the questioned people state that their trip coincided with the description they found on blogs, websites, and forums. However, more than half of respondents (53.94%) state that their own feedback regarding the touristic destination they chose was quite similar with the one described online by other users, while one third reported that the online description of the trip has a medium resemblance with the reality they faced.

From the various elements that form a touristic package, the highest influence of Internet upon respondents' subsequent choice can be remarked on points of interest and accommodation (Table no. 1).

Table no. 1: Influence of virtual communities (blogs, specialized websites, forums, social networks) upon touristic destination choice

	Very low influence %	Low influence %	Medium influence %	High influence %	Very high influence %
Destination/Location	15.83	15.11	33.81	27.34	7.91
Accommodation	8.63	7.19	37.41	32.37	14.39
Restaurants/gastronomy	7.91	11.51	36.69	33.09	10.79
Transportation	10.79	11.51	38.23	27.34	12.23
Points of interest	11.51	8.63	23.74	38.13	17.99

Source: Authors, according to research data

Nevertheless for the majority of respondents, all important elements that form a touristic package are influenced by Internet information, in various degrees that range from medium influence to very high influence. This is because almost 70% of the surveyed people consider that online posted information is credible enough to be taken into account.

Conclusions

People need information and, before buying the touristic package, they search for it in various sources, as they want to be in control of the things that they will find in their future touristic destination. There are many factors that influence customer's choices for touristic destinations, such as advertising, the touristic package, the price etc. Advertising through Internet is one of the most used and efficient ways, more and more companies using it. Along with the clear advertising messages that promote certain touristic destinations which are displayed on various websites, there are also hidden advertising messages placed by many companies on blogs, forums, specialized touristic websites, social networks, video files etc. These platforms are mostly used for sharing personal experiences by different users and many reviews are objective, representing the true experience of the individual when confronted with a certain situation, a certain person, a specific product or service. Companies use these individual experience sharing platforms by infiltrating their own employees or collaborators. Hidden under anonymity, pretending to be persons who have no other interest than relating their experience in the most objective way, these people adjust the truth about touristic destinations, points of interest, hotels and restaurants, travel companies etc., according to various companies' interests. Our research showed that most of users are aware that the recommendations received online are not describing identically the reality they experienced. However, people generally use Internet as source of information when deciding for a touristic destination and they trust quite enough the advices and experiences shared online by other users. Also, the information obtained online proves to have a quite high influence upon people's choice for a touristic destination, especially when looking for details about a specific location, points of interest to be visited and accommodation. Despite the fact that traditional travel agencies are used by very few respondents, they are considered in general credible and useful sources of information, when compared with information received through online touristic counselling when choosing a touristic destination. As Internet is a free space for sharing information, people need to be aware of the unethical practices certain companies promote. However, the situation is just like in the real market. Once a blog or a website proves to give unrealistic - company sponsored reviews about a touristic destination, contradicting other sources of information or people's very own experiences, it will acquire in time negative feedback. People will leave the respective online platforms and will head to more credible sources of information. As long as the information people receive from the vast Internet proves to be useful and relevant for them, online counselling comes as a viable option to traditional travel agency counselling.

Acknowledgement

References

Australian Tourism Data Warehouse, 2011. *Improve your online presence with the Tourism e kit.* [online] Available at: <http://tourismekit.atdw.com.au> [Accessed 11 July 2014].

Chen, Y.C., Shang, R.A. and Li, M.J., 2014. The effects of perceived relevance of travel blogs' content on the behavioral intention to visit a tourist destination. *Computers in Human Behaviours*, 30, pp. 787-799.

Cone Online Influence Trend Tracker, 2011. *Game Changer: Cone Survey Finds 4-out-of-5 Consumers Reverse Purchase Decisions Based on Negative Online Reviews*. [pdf] Available at: <http://www.conecomm.com/stuff/contentmgr/files/0/286c351989671ae 74994fec139863bb2/files/2011_cone_online_influence_trend_tracker_release_and_fac t_sheet.pdf> [Accessed 22 July 2014].

Di Pietro, L., Di Virgilio, F. and Pantano, E., 2012. Social network for the choice of tourist destination: attitude and behavioural intention. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, 3(1), pp.60-76.

Egger, R. and Buhalis, D., 2008. Introduction. In: R. Egger and D. Buhalis, eds., *eTourism case studies: Management & marketing issues in eTourism.* Hungary: Butterworth-Heinemann, pp. 1-3.

Internet Live Stats, 2014. *Trends & More (Statistics).* [online] Available at: <http://www.internetlivestats.com/statistics/> [Accessed 9 August 2014].

Kasavana, M.L., Nusair, K. and Teodosic, K., 2010. Online social networking: redefining the human web. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, 1(1), pp. 68-82.

Law, R., Leung, K. and Wong, J., 2004. The Impact of the Internet on Travel Agencies. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 16(2), pp. 100-107.

Lee, R., 2005. *The State of Blogging.* [online] 2 January 2005. Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2005/01/02/the-state-of-blogging/> [Accessed 10 August 2014].

Lee, W., Tyrrell, T. and Erdem, M., 2013. Exploring the behavioral aspects of adopting technology: Meeting planners' use of social network media and the impact of perceived critical mass. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, 4(1), pp. 6-22.

Lin, Y.S and Huang, J.Y., 2006. Internet blogs as a tourism marketing medium: A case study. *Journal of Business Research*, 59, pp. 1201-1205.

Mack, R.W., Blose, J. E. and Pan, B., 2008. Believe it or not: credibility of blogs in tourism. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 14, pp. 133-144.

Marin Pantelescu, A. and Ioncică, M., 2012. Researching the mass media role in promoting and selling tourists' packages in Romania. *Amfiteatru Economic*, XIV (Special No. 6), pp. 802-810.

Onete, B. and Popescu, D., 2010. Shifting quality concepts and paradigms. In: International Society of Commodity Science and Technology, *17th IGWT Symposium "Facing the Challenges of the Future: Excellence in Business and Commodity Science".* Bucharest, Romania, 21-25 September 2010, Special issue of „Calitatea - acces la succes" Journal, pp. 249-252, Bucharest.

Perlmutter, D. and McDaniel, M., 2005. The Ascent of Blogging. *Nieman Reports*, 59(3), pp. 60-64.

Sparks, A., Perkins, H. and Buckley, R., 2013. Online travel reviews as persuasive communication: The effects of content type, source, and certification logos on consumer behaviour. *Tourism Management*, 39, pp. 1-9.