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Following and Belonging to an Online Travel Community in Social Media, its Shared Characteristics and Gender Differences

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Abstract

This paper examines the characteristics of social media consisting a sense of belonging and following an online community in the context of tourism. A representative stratified sample of 301 respondents of foreign arrivals of tourists in the Athens airport, Greece in 2014 collected in June and July 2014 was employed. The sense of belonging was measured when following an online travel community. Results illustrated a statistically significant difference between men and women regarding how important it is for them to belong to an online travel community. In addition, research illustrated and described the shared characteristics of an online travel community. Essential features such as language specification requirements, the association of ideas, the exchange of comments and experiences among members are examined for the first time to date in this context in order to identify the framework of this relation. The paper describes the abovementioned characteristics in regard to belonging to an online travel community. The implications of the findings for companies, authorities and Destination Marketing Organizations concerning the shaping of their marketing and communication strategies and the opportunities that are created are further presented.

1. Introduction and background for the research

Social media play an important role in the promotion and communication of activities, services, and products to the public. People search for information on the internet -the mass communication medium- in order to seek what other people think about a specific product or service and this is called 'the world-of mouth' communication; this

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may take place through a predefined group of friends or with thousands of online-but-connected strangers on an online community where people express their points of view available to all (O'Connor, 2008; Gretzel & Hyan Yoo, 2008). Web applications facilitate a two-way communication and sharing of information, interoperability based on users, communication and initiative, allowing users to collaborate, interact with one another in regard to editing or adding to the website content (Click & Petit, 2010: 138; Chatzithomas et al., 2014).

Travel related information is among the information that people search on the Internet for the purposes of planning a journey or after the trip has taken place in regard to references made for the destination and trip (Gretzel & Hyan Yoo, 2008). Although research has taken place regarding group influence on product purchasing decisions, less time has been spent on services, and even less on tourism; this lack of attention occurs despite the recognition that informal information channels are a powerful force in service purchase decision-making (Currie, Wesley & Sutherland, 2008). It is typical to note the significance attributed to the idea of being able to have access for sharing, collaborating, and updating web content so that others may be able to exchange ideas and points of view without the limit of time or geography creating in that way social networks and relationships on the web (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012).

Messages may be communicated with the implementation of social media; nevertheless, their capabilities have not been realized yet although the communities that can be created online and the sharing of information that takes place online is worth noticing and examining. Research has shown that terminology has yet to be standardized and research on online virtual communities is still in its infancy (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Young Cung & Buhalis, 2008) and there is suggestion from the literature that the sense of belonging and the creation of online communities needs to be further explored and examined (Stavrianea & Kavoura, 2014). There is need for researchers to focus more on examining the perceptions of people who are users of social media and the way they feel about these media and how they perceive them (Ferguson & Greer, 2011; Chan-Olmsted & Cho, 2013). This paper aims to go a step further and examines the characteristics of the online travel community created on social media and the significance attributed to them by people who follow and belong to these online travel communities.

If sharing of ideas and people with common interests meet online together and exchange ideas, social media may in fact create a virtual community, which spreads the 'sense of belonging' to its members, and this may also take place in the tourism industry when someone decides to visit a travel destination (Kavoura & Stavrianea, 2014).

A representative stratified sample of 301 respondents of foreign arrivals of tourists in the Athens airport, Greece in 2014 was collected in June and July 2014 and descriptive statistics was used aiming to illustrate the characteristics of social media that reinforce a sense of belonging and following an online community in the context of tourism. We also aim to measure the sense of belonging among respondents when following an online travel community. In addition, this paper describes the shared characteristics of an online travel community, which are examined for the first time to date in this context in order to identify the framework of this relation.

2. Communication in online travel communities, the creation of an imagined community and gender's role

Platforms are databases of personal information, they become tools for (personal) storytelling and narrative self-presentation (Van Dijck, 2013: 200). Social media offer the possibility of communication with a group of participants who are willing to respond in a shared social context, which has no geographical limits (Boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010). The online audience is potentially limitless, but we often act as if it were bounded since we need a specific language, cultural references, style, and so on that comprise online identity presentation (Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Kavoura & Stavrianea, 2014).

There is a variety of activities one may do on social media such as participate in online word-of-mouth forums including blogs, discussion boards that are sponsored by a company, chat rooms, visit consumer product or services rating sites, Internet discussion boards and forums, sites containing digital audio, images, movies and photographs among others (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Gibson, n.d). People use social media to send messages, create stories, be co-creators of a story and contribute to message sharing for a group of people; in other words, a community is present online and organizations need to realize that it is there. The organization's aim should be to cultivate the feeling of belonging to a group in the real or virtual world, which engages consumers and introduces them to a sense of belonging (Kavoura, 2014).

Users trust more the online content for a destination that is created by other users than the one created from official tourism websites, travel agents and mass media advertising (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2011:1). It was found for example that in Twitter, a microblog platform where less than 200 words are used to create a text message, "the top ten most-followed users in Twitter were not corporations or media organizations but individuals who communicate directly with their followers via messages" (Bastos, Galdini Raimundo & Travitzki, 2013: 268). Social networking sites allow users to create online public profiles, invite friends and colleagues to access these profiles and share information with them (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). People with similar interests can be connected.

In addition, travellers trust more the comments made in the social media networks where other travellers place their point of view, share information and their experiences, they are influenced from the information provided and these networks consist of a way of socialization and interaction among like minded people with similar interests (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Young-Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Johnson, Kaye, Bichard &Wong, 2008). A new world of communication and collaboration has been created (Yaşa-Özeltürkay & Mucan, 2014). This interaction in the online communities with like minded people and peer reference groups may exert a strong influence (Currie, Wesley & Sutherland, 2008; Young-Chung & Buhalis, 2008).

Interactions with others encompass the dimension of hedonism, aesthetics, innovation, sign needs beyond the functional needs associated with communication and participation with other members, building relationships, exchanging ideas and opinions and getting involved (Young-Chung & Buhalis, 2008). Young-Chung's & Buhalis' abovementioned argument (2008) can potentially lead us a step further and be related in an attempt to describe an online imagined community where hedonism is associated with happiness and a sense of feeling part of a group, the aesthetic perspective can be associated with visual aspects so that the online community can take flesh and bonds with the use of photos and visual information, innovations and signs can be associated with the use of innovative ways in order to communicate with other people such as with the use of specific language and signs. Quadri-Felitti & Fiore (2013) also argue that photos may create memories on the online travel community. Thus, memories through photos can be a characteristic of an online travel community. The abovementioned dimensions are significant and we argue that they can be associated with an 'imagined community'-where its members may have never met, yet they feel engaged and attached to it. Which is then this imagined community?

The online community that can be created can be theoretically associated with Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined communities' -the 'sense of belonging' to a community where a sense of coherence exists between its members who feel they belong to the same group even if they have never met" (Anderson, 1991: 6-7), initially used to discuss the creation of the nation and people's identities from a sociological and political perspective-, with the online community which can be created with the use of social media between users all over the world. These users need to share the same interests for that specific group and have specific bonds that relate them. Social media may create an 'imagined community' among their targeted groups transcending in that way, physical boundaries (Danias & Kavoura, 2013; Kavoura, 2014).

This concept, in fact, may be well applied in the social media environment. Such media may provide the opportunity to companies, organizations, Destination Marketing Organizations and reviews' sites such as the Trip Advisor to create an 'imagined community' among their targeted group members all over the world, overcoming any geographical barriers. In an on-line environment, membership in an exclusive, country-clubbish community, where someone is or wishes to be part of, may be associated with the concept of the imagined community that can be the connecting tie that brings people together and engages them to a place brand. Social media may be considered as a strategic innovative marketing tool to reinforce such a sense of community belonging. The provision of network platforms where people with similar interests and desires to their own may create communities of like-minded individuals, where they are able to submit feedback in the form of criticism and helpful suggestions, contributes to a sense of community (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Belonging to a group in the real or virtual world engages consumers and introduces them to a sense of belonging, allowing them to have a kind of direct experience with the place brand even if they have never met, just as in the concept of the imagined community of Benedict Anderson.

A community has specific characteristics in order to be able to separate itself from others. Kavoura (2014) argued that social media use special symbols and may create an imagined online community similar to Anderson's imagined community, which has specific characteristics that people share, comradeship prevails, a sacred language and written script exist and people share a common interest or idea (Anderson, 1991).

The imagined audience exists only as it is written into the text, through stylistic and linguistic choices (Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Kavoura & Stavrianea, 2014). Topics discussed on social media and more specifically on Twitter, are indicated through the combination of a hashtag (#) and a keyword. The practice of using keywords to label tweets for example in Twitter, another social medium, most likely parallels the use of "tags" to freely categorize web content (Boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010). In fact, a new language or terminology emerges, posts, embeds, widgets, tweets, email, views, followers, 'befriending' or 'liking' are concepts used to make a conversation distinct; a new software language has grown up (@, #, RT, http) (Gibson, n.d.; Kavoura, 2014).

Social media use special symbols and may create an imagined online community similar to Anderson's imagined communities, which has specific characteristics that people share, comradeship prevails, a sacred language and written script exist and people share a common interest or idea (Anderson, 1991). Social media such as Facebook, allow fans to post their own experience and content on an organization page and create a much stronger sense of community (Hays, Page & Buhalis, 2013).

Gender differences have been found for Web usage in general and online travel information search in particular. Research also suggests that women are more likely to engage in word of mouth behavior (Gretzel & Hyan Yoo, 2008). Women are more open in communication and we expect that a statistical difference between men and women related to the significance attributed to the participation to an online travel community will exist.

3. Research Questions

Among the respondents, what is the percentage that trusts more the comments made by other members of the online travel community?

Among the respondents, what is the percentage that feels engaged with other members of the online travel community?

Among the respondents, what is the percentage that feels proximate (close) to other members of the online travel community even if they have never met?

Among the respondents, how important it is for them to belong to an online travel community?

Among the respondents, what is the percentage that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as language specification requirements (eg. hashtags, #, @, slang language)

Among the respondents, what is the percentage that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as uploading personal material associated with a travel destination

Among the respondents, what is the percentage that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as style of writing

Among the respondents, what is the percentage that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as aesthetics of photos

Among the respondents, what is the percentage that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as aesthetics of design

Among the respondents, what is the percentage that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as association of ideas.

We expect that there will be gender differences among the related variables.

4. Methodology

A representative stratified, based on nationality and gender, sample of 301 respondents of foreign arrivals of tourists in the Athens airport, Greece in 2014 was collected in June and July 2014. The sample consisted of 52% women and 48% of men. In addition, the sample consisted of foreign arrivals from the United States of America16.6%, United Kingdom 12.7%, France 11.8%, Cyprus 9.2%, Germany 9.2%, Australia 9.1%, Italy 6.8%, Switzerland 4.9%, Canada 4.8%, Belgium 4.8%, the Netherlands 3.5%, Spain 3.3% and the Russian Federation 3.12%. The above stratification was based on the official Athens Airport Authorities Arrival Research, which was

conducted in 2013. The selection of nationalities and their proportions included in the final sample covered more than 75% of the total foreign arrivals of tourists in the Athens Airport, Greece in 2013.

5. Results

Data analysis used descriptive statistics using SPSS. This section presents the results from the answers provided from the respondents. In regard to the percentages that trust more the comments made by other members of the online travel community, 275 respondents replied and in particular 8.4% strongly disagree, 6.5% disagree, 12.4% rather disagree, 19.6% nor agree neither disagree, 22.5% rather agree, 23.3% agree, 7.3% strongly agree.

In regard to the percentages for those that feel engaged with other members of the online travel community, 270 respondents replied and in particular 15.2% strongly disagree, 12.6% disagree, 12.6% rather disagree, 24.1% nor agree neither disagree, 17.0% rather agree, 15.2% agree, 3.3% strongly agree. In regard to the percentages for those that feel proximate (close) to other members of the online travel community even if they have never met, 268 respondents replied and in particular 18.7% strongly disagree, 16.4% disagree, 17.5% rather disagree, 19.0% nor agree neither disagree, 15.7% rather agree, 8.2% agree, 4.5% strongly agree. In regard to the percentages for those that replied that it is important for them to belong to an online travel community, 269 respondents replied and in particular 29% strongly disagree, 17.8% disagree, 9.3% rather disagree, 17.1% nor agree neither disagree, 15. 2% rather agree, 9.7% agree, 1.9% strongly agree. On this specific question, we found a statistical significant gender difference. It was more important for men (m=3.4848) to belong to an online travel community in comparison to women (m=3.3060).

In regard to the percentages for those that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as language specification requirements (eg. hashtags, #, @, slang language), 252 respondents replied and in particular 27.8% strongly disagree, 13.5% disagree, 11.1% rather disagree, 16.3% nor agree neither disagree, 15. 1% rather agree, 9.1% agree, 7.1% strongly agree. In regard to the percentages for those that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as uploading personal material associated with a travel destination, 247 respondents replied and in particular 22.3% strongly disagree, 9.7% disagree, 12.6% rather disagree, 19.0% nor agree neither disagree, 19.8% rather agree, 11.3% agree, 5.13% strongly agree. In regard to the percentages for those that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as style of writing, 247 respondents replied and in particular 21.5% strongly disagree, 12.6% disagree, 13.0% rather disagree, 20.6% nor agree neither disagree, 20.6% rather agree, 9.3% agree, 2.4% strongly agree. In regard to the percentages for those that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as aesthetics of photos, 253 respondents replied and in particular 16.2.% strongly disagree, 5.1% disagree, 9.5% rather disagree, 22.1% nor agree neither disagree, 23.3% rather agree, 14.2% agree, 9.5% strongly agree. In regard to the percentages for those that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as aesthetics of design, 245 respondents replied and in particular 21.2% strongly disagree, 6.5% disagree, 8.6% rather disagree, 25.7% nor agree neither disagree, 18.8% rather agree, 13.9% agree, 5.3% strongly agree.

In regard to the percentages for those that when they belong to an online travel community, they feel that they share a specific code of communication with other members as far as association of ideas, 248 respondents replied and in particular 16.1% strongly disagree, 5.6% disagree, 10.1% rather disagree, 23% nor agree neither disagree, 20.6% rather agree, 14.5% agree, 10.1% strongly agree.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Given the fact that the existing scarce literature (Gretzel & Hyan Yoo, 2008) has shown that there are gender differences related to Web usage in general and online travel information search in particular and taking into consideration that research also suggests that women are more likely to engage in word of mouth behavior (Gretzel & Hyan Yoo, 2008), this study adds to the literature since results from the scant literature are contradictory. Shen et

al. (2014) found no significant relationship between gender and e-self expression as a consumer WOM driver. On the contrary, on another study by Bae and Lee (2011) it was found that the effect of online consumer reviews on purchase intention is stronger for females than males. Further research needs to take place so that we can reach conclusions. Previous research may explain the statistical significant difference in regard to the percentages that replied that it is important for them to belong to an online travel community, where 269 respondents replied and in particular 29% strongly disagree, 17.8% disagree, 9.3% rather disagree, 17.1% nor agree neither disagree, 15.2% rather agree, 9.7% agree, 1.9% strongly agree. As mentioned above, on this specific question, we found gender difference. It was more important for men (m=3.4848) to belong to an online travel community in comparison to women (m=3.3060).

Respondents of this study were also found to trust other people's comments, to a significant degree feel engaged with other members, share a specific language which is particular for social media, share personal material associated with a travel destination, share a specific style of writing, share a specific code in regard to aesthetics of photos and aesthetics of design and feel they share with other members an association of ideas. Further research needs to take place in order to more thoroughly examine these elements and help us better understand online travel communities and their characteristics. It is important to note that the foreign visitors travelling to Athens agree that they trust more the comments made by other members of the online travel community and they feel engaged with other members of this community. In this context, the arguments that the online communities can actually "be" the word of mouth of the destination that the experiences of people can be promoted and advertised by authorities and people (Ozdemir & Culhan, 2009) and that implementing social networks can initiate powerful connections with customers (Yaşa-Özeltürkay & Mucan, 2014 are further reinforced. Social media are powerful and in times of economic crisis, may provide an innovative tool in the marketing communication strategies of businesses and organizations (Kiráľová, 2014; Kiráľová, 2010; Amaral et al., 2014; Kiráľová and Malachovský, 2014). The fact that people are willing to follow and belong to online travel communities, that they trust the comments made by other members of these communities, that they feel engaged and close to the other members and the fact that they feel they share a specific code of communication, as shown in the results of this study, may therefore lead companies, authorities and Destination Marketing Organizations that are concerned with the shaping of their marketing and communication strategies to take into consideration not only the comments made in these communities but also identify any discrepancies that can potentially take place and adapt the best practices and targeted marketing communication programs that can help them achieve stronger travel destination brands. New technologies and the implementation of innovative tools is a necessity (Sakas et al., 2014; Stalidis, and Karapistolis, 2014).

Acknowledgements

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