10 Digital and Social Media in Tourism

Chapter outline

The opportunity to digitise media content has transformed the way in which small tourism businesses' promotional material can be made available across different internet-based platforms. Over half of the world's population are internet users, and we are now witnessing the most technologically savvy consumers in history. The emergence of Web 2.0 in 2004 enabled co-creation of content on social media, which has democratised the internet. User-generated content (UGC) on social media, related to tourism, has reached levels that now swamp the marketing communications of the global travel industry. For small tourism businesses, digital and social media offer the benefits of lower costs and greater efficiency than traditional marketing approaches, and provide opportunities to enhance the visitor experience and relationships with customers. The chapter discusses how travellers use various digital and social media, both creating and being influenced by online content, during the three stages of travel planning, travel, and post-travel; and presents different types of opportunities for small tourism businesses to engage with consumers through digital and social media. The chapter does not attempt a technical discussion on how to design and manage digital platforms, as the technology will have changed since the time of writing. Management of the digitisation and placement of media can be efficiently outsourced. The focus here is on the need to have a plan for engaging with consumers online. What is required is a clear focus on *social* engagement, rather than simply *media* placement.

Learning aims

To enhance your understanding of:

- The influence of digital and social media in tourism

- How travellers are using digital and social media

- Opportunities for small businesses to use digital and social media.

> ## Key terms
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> ### Digital media
> Media content such as text, photos, graphics, audio and video, which are encoded into machine readable formats (digitised), and able to be transferred to other devices, sent across the internet, and used across a business' various online promotional platforms.
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> ### Web 2.0
> The internet platform facilitating content and applications to be continuously modified by all users in a collaborative way.
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> ### Social media
> The activities of virtual communities who share information, knowledge and opinions, using Web-based applications that enable ease of creating and modifying content.

The digital media era

The commercial digitisation of media content evolved in earnest during the late-1990s, following the widespread adoption of the internet. Prior to this development, traditional media (e.g. brochures, advertising material) were difficult to transfer to other people, devices and locations. In the early 1990s for example, print media generally had to be photocopied and shared by floppy disc or sent by facsimile. Audio content was stored on cassettes, which had to be physically distributed to another location, as were video and film. Advertising material therefore had a limited shelf life and limited range of usage. Now, all forms of media content, such as text, photos, graphics, audio and video, can be encoded into machine readable formats (digitised), and made available to other people and devices, sent across the internet, and used across a business' various online promotional platforms.

The internet e-commerce era started in 1995 with the launch of Amazon.com and eBay.com (Kaplan & Haelein, 2009). As highlighted in Table 10.1, by 2017 half the world's population had become internet users, with the highest population penetration in North America (88.1%), and the highest number of users in Asia (almost 2 billion). Worldwide, the number of internet users grew by nearly 1000% during the period 2000-2017. Furthermore, the number of mobile-only internet users is now over 15% of adults (Mander, 2016). By 2014, mobile apps generated more revenue than Hollywood's movie industry (The Courier-Mail, 2015), with the TripAdvisor App reaching 100 million downloads (Pike, 2016). By 2020 it has been estimated there will be over 30 billion devices connected to the internet and most of these will be mobile (Gartner, 2013, in Trendwatching, 2014).

Table 10.1: World internet users as at June 2017. Adapted from Internet World Stats (2017)

	Internet users Dec 2000 (Millions)	Internet users June 2017 (Millions)	Penetration of population	Growth 2000-2017
Asia	114,304	1,938,076	46.7%	1,595%
Europe	105,096	659,634	80.2%	528%
Latin America/ Caribbean	18,069	404,269	62.4%	2,137%
Africa	4,514	388,376	31.2%	8,501%
North America	108,096	320,059	88.1%	8%
Middle East	3,284	146,972	58.7%	4,374%
Oceania/ Australia	7,620	28,180	69.6%	1%
World Total	360,985	3,885,567	51.7%	976%

The rise in influence of social media in tourism

During the Web 1.0 era, the internet was used predominantly to push static information in one direction, in what was a *read-only* format; which didn't facilitate any interaction with, or between, other users (Borges, 2009). However, in 2004 the emergence of Web 2.0 enabled user generated content (UGC) to be uploaded. Web 2.0 was used at that time as a term to describe a platform enabling content and applications to be continuously modified by all users in a collaborative way (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). This development didn't represent a sudden upgrade of the internet, but rather the availability of a new group of programmes such as Adobe Flash, RSS, and Javascript, which radically changed the way information could be created, disseminated and viewed by any internet user (Sigala, 2012).

TIME Magazine named its 2006 person of the year as **You,** the internet user, to acknowledge the democratising power of social media. By 2013, engaging with social media had become the most popular activity on the internet (GWI, 2014 in Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). Social media is defined as (Brake & Safko, 2009:6):

activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios.

The volume of UGC on social media, related to tourism, now swamps the marketing communications of the global travel industry. Furthermore, traffic to the world's top two web sites, facebook.com and youtube.com, dwarfs that of traditional mass media sites such as cnn.com, nytimes.com, bbc.co.uk, and espn.go.com (Pan & Crotts, 2012). This shift in power from corporate organisations to internet users and virtual communities has occurred in a short space of time, and the global tourism industry is being forced to adapt quickly to the digital and social media phenomenon (Pike, 2016:79):

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