

4 The role of social media marketing in the travel planning and decision-making processes of today's travelers

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Introduction

The travel and tourism industry contribute extensively to the modern economic system, as indicated by the *Economic Impact 2019*. According to this report published by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the industry represents 10.4% of global GDP, contributing to 10% of global employment (WTTC, 2019). Travel and tourism stand as a set of the most promising sectors in the world while they heavily rely on information, which is indispensable for travelers throughout their travel decision making process. In today's world, where the World Wide Web has become a major information source and marketing communication channel owing to the rapid development of information communication technologies, online marketing of travel and tourism related products and services has replaced offline forms of marketing, which once used to be very largely paper-based. This reality brings with it that consumers are not dependent on travel agencies to plan their next vacations (Wagner & Buhalis, 2013). Also, the evolution achieved in information and communication technologies now allow travelers and tourists to have direct multimedia contact with different aspects of any given destination, such as the culture, heritage, landscapes and different tourist services (Jimenez-Barreto *et al.*, 2020) via travel websites and social media platforms.

Literature review

Given the highly competitive nature of today's travel market, it is no surprise that the inclusion of digital tools to the traditional marketing mix is a prevalent practice for destinations. Amongst these digital tools, social media emerged as the most powerful marketing tool while providing a surprisingly global reach for the destination and tourism organizations at a very low cost. Before delving into why and how social media platforms emerged, the concept of online community should be explored first. The information technology aspect is emphasized in the online community definition of Lee *et al.* (2003); in its simplest definition, it is a cyberspace that allows members to create content; while the definition proposed by Kang *et al.* (2007) focuses on the social aspect, and turns out as a social formation in which people join of their free will and organize the contents by interacting with other members. Online travel communities are defined by Lee by emphasizing the common values of people. According to Lee (2005), communities developed by a group of people who have a common travel taste and desire and adhere to common values, norms and interpretations are defined as online travel communities.

Back in 1968, in a very visionary manner, Andy Warhol said "*In the future, everyone will be world famous for 15 minutes*", which can now be interpreted as referring to every individual's possibility of attaining fame even for a brief period of time due to the increasing prevalence of social media outlets brought about by the advent of the Internet (Brainyquote, n.d.). To support the same line of thought, Li and Wang (2010) posited that the Internet has evolved into a participatory platform rather than the broadcasting medium it once used to be, and it now enables people to turn into the 'media' themselves for the sake of collaborating and sharing information. Similarly, 'YOU', which TIME Magazine named Person of the Year in 2006, represents all users, (Arola, 2010), which also stresses the individuality aspect and the democratizing potential of social media.

According to Paris *et al.* (2010), the concept of social media is a design that shares information over the world wide web, has content created directly by users, facilitates communication and saves time. The concept of social media is not just a single-channel type of communication. In addition, it contains all types of media created by multiple users, such as travel-related web pages, blogs, and social networking pages. Various social media platforms, the most popular and widely used ones being Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Youtube, are also viewed as tools for creating online communi-

ties comprising of users who share similar interests, activities, and objectives (Bolotaeva & Cata, 2010). Kaplan and Haenlein (2006) defined social media from a broader perspective. According to the researchers, the term 'social media' describes an Internet-based platform and a sharing environment where all users create content. In addition to this, all blogs, social networking sites, virtual gaming environments, and all web pages where users can communicate directly and openly with each other are within the scope of social media.

Generations and travel behaviors

Today's travelers have access to a diverse set of resources for travel related information search thanks to the digitally induced communication tools and platforms. Some other studies in the literature state that today's travelers seek authenticity, want to belong to a group, and question the meaning in their lives, and their motivation to travel is shaped in line with these questions (Nijs & Peters, 2002, Ter Borg, 2003). According to *2021 Travel Trends Report*, travelers will tend to embark on more trips and extend their vacations, use their savings on a dream vacation. *Future Traveller Tribes 2030 Report*, on the other hand, stresses that today's travelers are open-minded and mobile savvy. Besides this, 62% of them use their smartphones before and during their travel, while they take the same number of holidays a year as Generation Z. Also, when it comes to travel inspiration, today's travelers are influenced most by pictures posted by their friends on social media platforms (Amadeus, 2021). Although activities and experiences are high on today's travelers' priority list, having a once-in-a-lifetime experience and traveling to destinations where they can take memorable pictures and have vacations with friends are also important considerations for them, significantly more so than it used to be for previous travelers.

Before delving into generational marketing theories and models and how they are connected to social media marketing in tourism, first, the very phenomenon of generations should be explored. A survey of literature revealed the book named '*The Problem of Generations*' in which Karl Mannheim treated generations as a special type of social class. This study is considered as a seminal study with respect to generations, and emerged from systematic and comprehensive studies based on scientific methods (Bengston *et al.*, 1974: 4; Jaeger, 1985: 275-278). According to Mannheim, individuals coming from the same generation share a common position in the social and historical process, just like individuals who come from the same social class. He also stated that individuals from the similar age

groups in a certain society and period express that they have similar feelings and thinking structures, similar experiences and similar behavioral patterns. However, age group is not the only criterion that determines the generation. The society, time and social conditions in which individuals live also affect the generation, together with the age group (Mannheim, 1952: 290-292).

One of the most important generational groupings in the field of social sciences, which divides society into more meaningful and wider groups, is the study conducted by William Strauss and Neil Howe in 1991 (Carlson, 2008). Strauss and Howe, divided society into larger groups consisting of common denominators by taking the historical movements that have important effects on the social level as their reference point and defined the generations that has been discussed quite frequently in the related literature (Strauss & Howe, 1991).

The generations referred to in the marketing literature today are based upon the explanation and definition proposed for generations in the context of American society. However, with the phenomenon of globalization and developments in technology, regional and national differences are disappearing, and new generations become more like one another day by day (Levitt, 2006). In the literature, many generations both living today and belonging to historical periods have been described. However, there are differences of opinion regarding the year intervals covered by the generations. The widely accepted generational classification as per marketing theory are Baby Boomers and the generations X, Y and Z. The Baby Boomer generation covers those born between 1946-1964 (Green, 2006: 6; Moschis *et al.*, 2000: 4; Harpaz & Snir, 2015: 255), Generation X comprises of individuals born between 1965-1979 (Erickson, 2010; Green, 2006; Harpaz & Snir, 2015), Generation Y represents the people born between 1980-1994 (Hor & Keats, 2008; Lamanna *et al.*, 2014; Harpaz & Snir, 2015) and Z generation covers those born between 1995- 2009 (Hor & Keats, 2008; Symeonidis *et al.*, 2009; McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2011).

The name Baby Boomers denoting the generation of individuals born between 1946 and 1964, was coined due to the significant number of babies born during the 19 years' period it covers. In the USA, 75.8 million babies were born in this 19-year period, and this figure corresponds to 40% of the population of the USA in 1964 (Green, 2006). For this particular generation, names such as *The Sixties Generation*, *Flower Children*, *The Me Generation*, and *Yuppies* are also used (Cochran *et al.*, 2009). Baby Boomers are the first generation to grow up with television. Therefore, television has a signifi-