Social Media and Tourism: A Digital Investment for Thessaly?

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Abstract The development of social media has been reported to have reshaped the tourism industry, as in general revolutionary information and communication technologies have deeply affected the society and its overall functioning. Facebook and Tripadvisor are two of the applications mostly discussed that do have an important impact on the image of the companies associated with the sector.

The contribution of Greek tourism in the country's economy has been highlighted several times over the years. However, not all the regions contribute equally. More specific, coastal areas and islands that represent the core Greek tourist product, sea and sun, are the most popular ones. Others, like Thessaly, despite their potential, are struggling to maintain a piece of the pie.

Through this study is attempted, two hot issues, such as social media and tourism, to be approached and to conclude in whether a digital investment for the region of Thessaly would be a valuable one. In order to answer that, relevant literature has been reviewed. The current situation has been described, involving the promotion of both Thessaly as destination and tourism-related enterprises using ICTs and social media. The factors affecting the effectiveness of the investment, like economic circumstances, the geography and culture of the region are also examined.

Keywords Tourism • Social media • Place marketing • Destination marketing • Thessaly • Greece

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1   Introduction

The internet is reasonably considered as one of the most important innovations of all time. That is because of the tremendous impact it proved to have not only to business and particular undertakings but also in human nature and everyday life. According to the latest data, internet penetration over the world's population is 42 %, with the greatest penetration rates appearing in North America, Australia and Europe (Internetworldstats.com, 2014). According to the same source, by the end of 2013 internet penetration reached 59.9 % in Greece. That makes Greece the fourth country in European Union with the lowest penetration percentage, after Romania, Bulgaria and Italy.

Several studies so far, have examined in detail the impact of internet and information and communication technologies (ICTs) over tourism and the corresponding industry. Through the analysis of different aspects with a variety of methods, most of them conclude on a reshaping of the travel industry as a whole that has already occurred.

The application of ICTs on the tourism industry, called e-tourism by Buhalis and Jun (2011) raised quickly awareness of the scientific community. More important, Web 2.0 became a hot issue over the past few years. According to Turban et al. (2008), the term represents "the second generation of internet-based services that let people collaborate and share information online in perceived new ways". Some of the most important Web 2.0 tools include RSS (Really Simple Syndication), podcasting, vodcasting, widgets, facilities to share, tag and classify information, mashup, data embedding systems and webcast (Haro de Rosario, Gálvez Rodríguez, & Caba Pérez, 2013; Bizirgianni and Dionysopoulou, 2013).

The vast majority of the tools above appear to be present in most social media. Social media on the other hand are found to be defined in many ways. However, the common denominator of the definitions given is that they refer to platforms friendly for the public to use in order to share all kinds of data and information and encourage interaction. Social media include blogs, wikis, media sharing platforms like Youtube and Slideshare, social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn and Twitter, which actually consists a category by itself (Haro de Rosario et al., 2013; Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013).

Tourism industry's highly service-based nature is the reason why the applicability of Web 2.0 is so wide. Travel plans, destinations, hotels, tourist guides, restaurants, sights and events transform into experiences, which can be shared via text, photos and videos. More important, all of the above have the power and attraction to become popular issues of discussion over social networks (Miguéns, Baggio, & Costa, 2008).

Of course, it didn't take much time until the opportunity given to be exploited by marketing specialists. Marketing practices in tourism and hospitality are strongly correlated with social media and emerging technologies (Iancu, Popescu, Popescu, & Vasile, 2013; Buhalis and Deimezi, 2004), since organized crowds are there easy

to be found and targeted. However, what seems to attract more attention lately is the rising power of users in social media campaigns (Ketter & Avraham, 2012).

2   Literature Review

While the linear model of communication in place marketing campaigns starts to become outdated, a many-to-many communication model has already been formed (Zouganeli, Trihas, & Antonaki, 2011). The linear model of communication has three core components: the source, the message and the receiver. Those are characterized by a quite simple, one- way interconnection. So, the source, which is either a tourism business or a government tourism related unit, delivers the message, which is actually its selling proposition, to the receiver, the customer to be. Or at least that was the traditional process to market a place, as a tourism destination, which is true that has degraded due to the appearance and clear domination of social media (Ketter & Avraham, 2012).

The many-to-many model of communication previously mentioned refers to the ability given by social media to each user to interact one another, by sharing experiences via text, photos and videos. As a result, users transform from passive recipients to active sources of information. The interesting part of the story though is that information shared by consumers, is perceived in the minds of other potential consumers as real and the whole process is characterized by transparency (Haro de Rosario et al., 2013; Treer 2010).

The basic principal that actually defines the many-to-many model of communication is the one of User Generated Content (UGC). As explained by O'Reilly (2005), the term refers to the ability of users not only to produce their own content but also to consume content that other users have created. The bidirectional nature of the model under discussion can be clearly understood when referring to the most popular UGC application, Tripadvisor. Tripadvisor is "a website based on the idea that travelers rely on other travelers' reviews to plan their trips, or at least can be satisfactorily helped in their decisions by them" (Miguens, Baggio, & Costa, 2008). More specific, Tripadvisor attempts to organize the so-called electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM), which is also generated on Twitter (Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013), in a user friendly platform.

Considering all the above, the tremendous change in the tourism and hospitality arena is a solid phenomenon that needs to be addressed by enterprises in the sector through the adoption of social media in their business strategies (Gretzel, Sigala, & Christou, 2012). Highlighting everything presented until that point, it has been reported that trust in a social media brand is strongly engaged with brand loyalty (Christou, 2015) the endlessly pursuing aspect of all marketers.

As far as the extent of the exploitation of social media concerns, research shows that tourism related enterprises and corresponding governmental units do not take full advantage of its capabilities (Sigala et al. 2012). More specific, Haro de Rosario et al. (2013) results indicate limited development of social media and web 2.0 tools

in top hotel chains. Most of them struggled to assure visibility, by creating a Facebook page or opening a Twitter account but didn't take it one step further and failed to build trust and credibility. That happened since, even though people did criticize the hotels and the services offered, there was no one there to reply and present the administration's point of view (Buhalis & Mamalakis, 2015).

Regarding European National Organizations (NTOs) and the way they use Facebook as a representative social media example, Zouganeli et al. (2011) noticed that only a little more than half of them had created a Facebook page by the time the study took place. Also, those who did, did not fully employed their potential under a structured social media campaign. As expected, the limited interaction with the public minimized the number of fans of the page and again failed to serve the reason of its existence (Dionysopoulou and Mylonakis, 2013).

In general, communication strategies involving social media are relatively inexpensive and time-effective as marketing efforts, while the interaction enables useful feedback to reach the business (Ketter & Avraham, 2012). Additionally, Sigala (2011) underlines the vulnerability of tourism as an industry and suggests extended but careful use of social media in crisis management.

A study conducted by Roy, Maxwell, and Carson (2014), monitoring the behaviors related to the subject examined of four small-medium enterprises in central Arkansas concludes that the four main aspects that influence social media usage are ease of use, affordability and availability of time to implement or technical support. It is also underlined the preference of those hospitality and tourism-related SMEs to social media that are already familiar to the public (Scott and Orlikowski, 2010).

3 Methodology

The main aim of the study is to decide whether a digital investment concerning social media in tourism sector would be applicable, suitable and useful for Thessaly, a region located in Central Greece. In order to reach a decision, tourism as an industry and the Greek tourism product are examined. Special attention is given to the fluctuation of numbers related to the attractiveness of the country's tourism product and destinations. The impact of the economic crisis is also highlighted. A thorough analysis is conducted concerning Thessaly's special characteristics, geographic and cultural, followed by comparative measurements associated with the value the region adds to the overall Greek tourism selling proposition.

The main part of the study focuses on how the National Tourism Organization, the Ministry of Tourism, the prefecture of Thessaly and tourism-related enterprises of the region use social media. The extent of usage and promotion is measured through data collected from Tripadvisor, Facebook and official national tourism websites.

The information extracted through the analysis is combined with knowledge gained after careful examination of studies focusing on the communication strategies formed mostly from government agencies in order to boost Thessaly's tourism

potential. Last are discussed the political, economical, social and technological circumstances in Greece, that could affect the undertaking.

After considering the above mentioned information, the study concludes in a proposition over the strategy that needs to be embedded, the possible barriers towards its accomplishment and the areas that should be further clarified before taking action.

4 Results

Greece is one of the most popular destinations in the Mediterranean, while tourism is considered in general a major financial activity. According to the Greek Tourism Confederation, Greek Tourism contributed in 2012 to the country's GPA about 16.4 %. Its contribution to employment was accounted for 18.3 %. More specific, the International Tourism Receipts, the same year, reached 10 billion Euros.

Due to the socioeconomic and political crisis Greece has undergone since 2009, Greek tourism was characterized by a general contraction in terms of both arrivals and receipts. However, corresponding data from the last 2 years show a clear tendency for the numbers to be restored (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2014). Based on that fact, it is believed that tourism might be the driving force behind the country's economic recovery (Kapiki, 2012).

As far as setting policies concerns, the authority in charge is, as expected the Ministry of Tourism. Supervised by the Ministry of Tourism, the Greek National Tourism Organization is basically responsible in taking theory into action or simply applying the policies set by the government. Of course, everything mentioned above, is surrounded by a European framework that basically allows interaction and encourages consumption of the within EU borders tourism product.

Acknowledging though the great effect a successful regional policy might have in boosting local tourism, regions' and prefectures' authorities do try to form specialized policies for the corresponding areas they serve. It is attempted for these policies to be custom-made and as a result, to rely on the specific and unique characteristics of the region.

Among Greece's competitive advantages are its rich cultural legacy, natural beauty and geographic diversity (Investingreece.gov.gr, 2015). However, what need to be considered are the not so favorable aspects of Greek tourism. The geography of Greek tourism is one of those. It refers to the dissimilar distribution of tourists' visits. In particular, tourists prefer to visit coastal areas and islands. The fact of their concentration in such geographic regions can be explained through the establishment of Greece over the years as a destination, where visitors can enjoy sun and sea.

Narrowing the selling proposition of the country in that diptych is actually the reason why tourism appears to have intense seasonality. The tourism product selected to be the flagship of Greek tourism can be offered only during the summer.

Obviously, that fact generates a series of issues along with little exploitation of the already existing infrastructure and increased cost of use (Polyzos & Saratsis, 2013).

Thessaly is a region located in Central Greece. It consists of four prefectures: Larissa, Magnesia, Trikala and Karditsa. Thessaly actually covers an area of about 14.000 km^3 and given the last census that took place in 2011, 732.762 people live there (Statistics.gr, 2011).

Considering the diversity of geomorphology in Greece that changes even within relatively narrow areas, the four counties mentioned above appear to have different characteristics based on their location. Larissa occupies the northern part of the region, while Magnesia the southeastern one. Both of them do have coastal areas, while Sporades islands (Skiathos, Skopelos and Alonissos) are considered a part of Magnesia. On the other hand, Trikala, located on the western part of the region and Karditsa, on the southwestern one are both landlocked.

The city of Larissa is the capital of Thessaly and as such, it represents the financial, administrative, religious and scientific center of the region. As far as the ground of the prefecture concerns, it is 48 % flat, 25 % semi-mountainous and 27 % mountainous. Mountains (Mount Olympus), along with rivers (Pineios) and lakes are present to Larissa's natural landscape. The rich history of the prefecture is delivered through its religious and archaeological monuments and museums. Additionally, ski resorts and mountain trails already mapped do give an extra motive for tourists to visit Larissa even in winter (Lartourism.thessaly.gov.gr, 2015).

Magnesia "combines the green mountain landscape with the deep blue of the Aegean sea". More specific, Mount Pilion is quite famous not only from a natural beauty point of view but also due to the architecture of the local mansions. The three islands of the Northern Sporades are differentiated one from the other. Skiathos is characterized as the cosmopolitan island, while Skopelos is the more traditional one. On the other hand, Alonissos is the ecological island. At last, Volos, the capital of the prefecture, is supported by rich mythological background but also captures the visitor due to its unique dynamics and modern essence (Magnesia-tourism.gr, 2015).

The prefecture of Trikala is quite distinctive as a destination due to its natural beauty. Chaliki mountain, Aspropotamos river, along with lake Verlinga compose the basic landscape. However, religious attractions such as the monasteries of Meteora and the overall Kalampaka area, is what is even more distinctive about it (Meteorabooking.gr, 2015).

As far as nature concerns, the prefecture of Karditsa is quite similar with the one of Trikala, with the religious aspect not so clearly outlined. Instead, there are several activities for tourists basically around Lake Plastira. Getting in touch with local tradition is also quite easy through following routes set from village to village (Karditsa—Tourist Guide, n.d.).

Besides the natural resources already mentioned, Thessaly possesses 19 caves and 9 medicinal spas that can be exploited for tourism purposes. In addition, across the whole region there are several areas that have been characterized over the years as areas with special ecological and aesthetic value. Both of them are protected through presidential decrees, ministerial decisions or European and international

agreements, like NATURA 2000, CORINE and UNESCO sites (Department for Development Programming of Thessaly Region, 2011).

Given the above and several studies examining the capacity of the region for sustainable tourism development, Thessaly can be competitive in the global tourism market. However, what needs to be taken into consideration is the different degree of exploitation of the capabilities different geographic areas possess (Ministry of Development, 2003).

According to data released by the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels (Border Research and Research of the Regional Allocation of the Annual Tourist Spending, 2013), Thessaly ranks eighth in both number of incoming visitors and number of overnights, out of the 13 Greek regions. In terms of tourist spending, Thessaly comes ninth. However, when transforming the above in spending per overnight or spending per visitor, Thessaly falls in the eleventh and twelfth position, respectively. As expected, most tourists spending per overnight is observed in the islands of the South Aegean, in Crete, Attica and the islands of the North Aegean. All other regions' rates are below the country's average. Judging by the above data, Thessaly is not such an attractive destination by tourists' perspective, no matter its potential. As a result, tourism does not contribute to the region's economy as much as it does in other more popular regions.

When correlating the number of tourist spending per region and the origin of tourists, it turns out that tourists from Europe do spend more money when having their vacations in Thessaly. Between them, Italian tourists spend more, while German and French follow. Though, it is important to mention that there is no data concerning British tourists' spending. Information like those is crucial, since it is easier to identify the most profitable markets to promote the destination in question.

Interesting information is also given by the percentage distribution of tourist spending per region per sector. In descending order, tourist spending in Thessaly is distributed along accommodation, transports, shopping, restaurants and cafes and entertainment. Comparing Thessaly with the other 12 regions, it reveals that tourists in Thessaly do spend more than those in the remaining ten.

Over the past decade Greek tourism-related authorities, especially the Greek National Tourism Organization, have recognized the importance of promoting Greece as a destination through social media. More specific, since 2010, when the corresponding strategy was approved and applied in a 3 year basis, it was clearly stated in several reports that more than 80 % of the global community uses internet to decide and plan vacations. Social media enhance the experience, while they play a major role in cultivating emotions of content before, during and after the trip is taken. Furthermore, in order for the two core tourist audiences to be approached, British and Germans, those channels need to be exploited to the fullest (*Promotion Strategy from the Greek National Tourism Organization for the years 2014-2015-2016*, 2013).

Besides the Greek National Tourism Organization's website, which was redesigned in 2012 but is strictly informational and supervised by the corresponding

Ministry, in 2014 the campaign "Greece: All time classic" was launched. As a result, two new websites were created: "Visit Greece" and "Discover Greece".

"Visit Greece" website (Visit Greece, 2015) aims to answer potential tourists why to choose Greece as a destination to spend their vacations. Though it is supported by only two languages, Greek and English, it has a modern design and is linked with several social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, Foursquare, Pinterest, Google plus and Youtube. Most of the information found there is also shared to the corresponding blog. Of course, the website visitor has the opportunity to contact the administrators via email.

"Discover Greece" website (Discover Greece, 2015) is an even more useful and attractive tool in the hands of the potential tourists. Not only it provides information about the destination, but also through its contemporary design, helps the visitor to be, to plan the trip to Greece. The website is an initiative of the NGO "Marketing Greece", which only purpose is to promote the Greek tourism product. The website is supported in five languages, Greek, English, German, French and Russian. As expected, it is linked with Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Google plus, Pinterest and Instagram. What is distinctive about it is the opportunity given to the visitors to create the so-called "lovelist". Lovelist is a tool embedded into the website and practically aims to bond the potential tourist with Greece as a destination. Additionally, instead of simply contact the administrators, the website encourages its visitors to both share their opinion and send a query if needed. As in the case of "Visit Greece" website, this one too appears to have a blog that enables people to publish their own stories.

As proposed above, the extent in which tourism contributes to the economy of the region of Thessaly is not the desirable one. In order for Thessaly's potential to be exploited to the fullest, several plans have been published through the years. A recent report on the matter (Choustis, 2013) suggests the promotion of the local tourism product through the adoption of ICTs, among other equally important lines of action.

The current situation is far away from the one proposed. More specific, not even all prefectures of Thessaly have official websites supervised by the decentralized administration authorities dedicated to the areas' tourism product. Potential visitors of Karditsa can be informed about the destination only through an electronic brochure. That is not the case for the other three prefectures. Larissa's website is supported in four languages, Greek, English, German and French, Magnesia's in three, Greek, English and German, and Trikala's in only two, Greek and English. The visitor is given the opportunity to contact the administrator in all three websites via e-mail, but only the one of Trikala allows website content to be shared in social media with just a click. However, in all cases there is no official presence and promotion in social media.

An indication of the perception of the public and the popularity of the prefectures' capitals can be given by viewing the activity of those places on Facebook (Table 1). Both measures examined, "likes" and visits, agree that Volos is the most popular city in Thessaly. Considering however that the numbers mentioned are a result of both tourists' and locals' activity, they can be also used as a measure of

Table 1 Facebook activity of Thessaly's largest cities

Facebook places	Likes	Visits
Volos	34.873	217.917
Larissa	29.645	186.427
Trikala	19.840	131.583
Karditsa	16.701	70.934

Table 2 Thessaly's activity on Tripadvisor

Category	Number of reviews and opinions
Hotels	11.280
Vacation rentals	218
Attractions	3.379
Restaurants	5.127
Forum	515
Total	20.558
Candid traveler photos	293

how content people feel when sharing their presence in those places. It is important to note also that despite Volos has more residents, the city's popularity is greater than the one of Larissa.

As far as the activity of Thessaly on Tripadvisor concerns, more than 20.000 reviews and opinions have already been written about it as a destination and about 300 candid traveler photos have been posted (Table 2). Out of those reviews, more than half concern the hotels of the region listed. At that point it is important to note that out of 733 hotels that appear in the search results of "Discover Greece" website available for booking, only 137 are present and reviewed on Tripadvisor. The number of reviews about the 276 vacation rentals listed is significantly lower. The remaining reviews refer to the 93 attractions and 386 restaurants of Thessaly. Another 515 posts can be found in the discussion forum.

Based on Tripadvisor's rankings, Volos, the capital of Magnesia, is considered the most popular destination. That fact agrees with the conclusion drawn by the city's activity on Facebook examined previously. Second ranks the village Chania, where the ski center is located and is obviously quite famous especially in winter. The third position in terms of popularity is taken by Kalambaka, the city near Meteora, which many people visit all over the year for religious purposes. The remaining three positions are captured by Larissa, Tsagkarada, which is also located in Magnesia, and Trikala.

Except the analysis of data extracted from Tripadvisor concerning Thessaly's activity as reported in the platform, the region's comparative performance should also be examined. For that purpose, not all Greece's regions where chosen. Mainland regions, with or without coastal areas were selected. Attica and Central Macedonia though, were not included since there, are located the two main urban centers, Athens and Thessaloniki, respectively. As shown below (Table 3), Thessaly ranks third in terms of reviews, after Peloponnese and Epirus. Based on the available data, the under examination region ranks second concerning the candid traveler photos posted on Tripadvisor.

Table 3 Activity on Tripadvisor per region

Region	Reviews and opinions	Candid traveler photos
East Macedonia and Thrace	5.223	17
West Macedonia	3.504	No data
Epirus	26.235	168
Thessaly	20.558	293
Central Greece	17.423	111
West Greece	14.774	No data
Peloponesse	52.443	371

Judging by the information presented above, Thessaly's activity as a destination compared with other regions on social media is quite high. It seems that visitors are eager to share their experiences in Thessaly on platforms like Tripadvisor and are attracted by its natural beauty, in such extent that a need emerges to capture the moment via camera lenses.

5   Conclusion

When examining a potential digital investment in any given sector, one of the first aspects that need to be considered is whether the attempt will reach the desirable audience. In the case discussed, despite the low internet penetration in Greece, the one of the target audiences, mostly developed European countries, is impressively high. In combination with the widespread phenomenon of social media interaction, it appears that the first precondition is met.

The reshaping of the travel industry has already taken place. As a result, an adjustment of both the authorities and the enterprises to the existing circumstances is mandatory. More specific, obsolete models of communication should be abandoned and replaced by new ones. The extent of the need of change in marketing and communication models is quite similar with the one of enriching the Greek tourism product with alternative tourism forms. As the informational model weakens, stimulus should be given for experience exchange. After all, demand does not only refer to the service during the trip, but expands in both periods before and after it.

For the benefits of a digital investment to be maximized, collaboration between interested parties is crucial. Moreover, authorities and enterprises should be aligned as far as the marketing strategy concerns. In order for such a relation to be formed, authorities need to be respected and productive, while enterprises should be reliable and cooperative.

The electronic Word-of-Mouth may have both positive and negative consequences for an enterprise or a destination. However, negative ones can be minimized when being ready to face them, while positive ones, if exploited properly, can trigger a chain reaction effect. It is true, that tourists will share their travel

experiences online anyway, and either authorities or enterprises are present or not. When present though and having a quick and responsible response, there is no case of loss, only gain.

Just presence in social media platforms does not guarantee a beneficial overcome. What needs to be assured is enduring and methodical engagement. It is all about an endless pursuit of earning good critics and bending the bad ones. That is why structured social media campaigns basically orchestrated by NTOs are suggested. Among their essential characteristics belong the ability to manage a crisis and to give incentives not only to tourist but also to locals, to embrace the undertaking. As far as small-medium enterprises concerns, where ease of use, affordability, availability of time and technical support are the criteria in choosing in which medium to be promoted, it would be wise to concentrate on one or two social media platforms for promotion.

In addition to the facts presented above, the political, economical, social and technological circumstances in Greece favor a digital investment in the tourism sector. Political and economical instability pushes government to adopt cost-effective solutions in sectors able to show results relatively quickly and drive Greece towards development. On the other hand, due to their reduced income, most people spend much more time at home surfing on the internet and pursuing contact through social media. Of course, smartphones, 3G and 4G technologies and VDSL internet that became exceptionally famous the last few years, made remote contact extremely easier.

Thessaly's great tourism potential is ready to be exploited. A digital investment might lead the region to transform into an attractive destination. Inevitably, tourism would contribute even more to the region's economy. In order for this to happen, authorities' and enterprises' attempts should be coordinated. Passing from theory to application though, will highlight the importance of properly educated personnel to manage the campaign. Last, employees in the tourism sector should understand and value the investment in order to promote and support it.

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