Tourists and social media: Already inseparable marriage or still a long-distance relationship? Analysis of focus group study results conducted among tourists using social media

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ABSTRACT

In the recent years, the Internet has become an important source of information and also a place where tourists document their travels and share their experiences using social media. On the one hand, the activity of people on the Internet corresponds to the needs of information society and systematic digitalisation of contemporary tourism. On the other hand, the constantly broadening access to new technologies in various aspects of life is accompanied by negative phenomena like information or communication overload and digital addiction. Hence, the study of the needs of tourists in the use of social media while travelling was chosen as the objective of this paper. To achieve this objective, a focus group study was conducted. As it transpired, the opinions of the tourists were diverse, ranging from enthusiasm and interest through severe criticism.

*Keywords***:** Tourists, social media, focus group study, use of social media while travelling

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of new technologies is steadily increasing in the contemporary economy, industry and science and also in the daily lives of people. Websites and mobile applications provide access to information, goods and services. The digitalisation in Poland has accelerated significantly in the last few years, and Polish information society has been rapidly developing. Numerous broadband network and telecommunication investments were realised. Digitalisation programmes, also in tourism and culture, were completed and a large number of electronic goods, services and information sources were created.

The developmental objectives adopted in the European Union programmes and the activities finances with the help of EU funds in the 2007-2013 period are major contributors to this growth. These tasks are continued in the new multi-annual financial framework 2014-2020. Currently 75.8% of households and 92.7% of businesses in Poland have Internet access, mainly through broadband connections. At least one computer is present in 77.9% of households and 64.8% of Poles (taking differences in age, professional activity, level of education and place of residence into account) state that they are regularly using the Internet (Central Statistical Office of Poland, 2015).

Increasingly often, people use social media, also due to growing access to mobile devices that are used to communicate, to search for information, to document one's life and to share experiences. The popularity of social media is also at constant increase and it can be said that using social media is in vogue.

The needs of information society include being a member of virtual societies that entails active participation in social media, and being on-line also when travelling. One may wonder here if the tourists are not overly concentrating on their presence on the Internet instead of enjoying and experiencing their trip, resting and visiting. The following study is an attempt to answer this question.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

Since the last few years the utilisation of social media has become a frequent topic in academic research, also in the field of tourism research. The main aim of the study that consisted of focus groups was to learn about the needs of tourists in the usage of social media. The questions developed for the study consisted in the utilisation of social media in three stages: (1) preparation for a trip (2) travelling (3) return from the trip.

The focus groups were conducted in 2016 and 2016 in five groups of 5 persons aged from 19 to 35. The studies were conducted in Cracow, Poland. The meeting with each group lasted for 60 minutes.

The participants were chosen based on two main criteria: participation in a tourism trip at least once in 6 months prior to the study and a declared familiarity with various types and functions of social media, but without the requirement to be an active user of any of them.

The participants were students and working persons with secondary and higher education. The analysis of the above studies' results was preceded by literature review, which was focused on the positive aspects of the use of social media and their negative influence on people. The literature review allowed for the presentation of theoretical background of the studies.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3. 1. Social media in tourism

For the last few decades, information and communication technologies have had a significant impact on the development of the economy of tourism (Poon 1993, Werthner, Klein 1999, Buhalis 2003, Buhalis, Jun 2011). Three main stages of ICTs development in the 20th century can be distinguished. In the 1970s Computer Reservations System was created, in the 1980s Global Distribution System was introduced on a wider scale, and in the 1990s, the Internet was becoming increasingly widespread (Buhalis 1998). Technological innovations have been readily absorbed by the tourism sector. As an answer to the changing needs of consumers, the e-tourism (Buhalis 2003) have been developed.

The information and tools available on the Internet have a significant influence on the decision-making behaviours of tourists (Buhalis 1998, Buhalis, Law 2008). The Internet is a source of information and enables the tourists to make bookings, payments and shopping as well as make virtual tours and plan the trip on-line. These functions also are available on social media tools (Xiang, Gretzel 2010, Fotis, Buhalis, Rossides 2012).

Travel information searches make use of online tourism domains in which the social media function (Xiang, Gretzel 2010). Some examples are: social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), consumer review sites (e.g. Trip Advisor) and media-sharing sites (e.g. Flickr, YouTube), wikis, Internet forums and location-based social media, blogs (e.g. Travelblog) and microblogs (e.g. Twitter), and voting sites (e.g. Digg) (Munar, Jacobsen 2014). Word-of-mouth marketing gained new distribution channels where social media, such as blogs, tweets and Internet forums have become sources of information (Tseng et al. 2015). Information shared through these media, especially on blogs, can be deemed by users as significant enough that it shapes the image of a particular place in their consciousness and influence their travel-related decision-making behaviours (Zehrer, Crotts, Magnini 2011).

Tourists use social media on different stages of travel, whether during preparations, during the trip (Xiang i Gretzel 2010) and after returning (Munar, Jacobsen 2014, Chung, Koo 2015). Social media enable easy, fast and direct access to information in real-time (Xiang, Gretzel 2010, Przybylski et al. 2013, Chung, Koo 2015). Users expect that this information will fulfill their expectations and will provide satisfactory and credible content (Chung, Koo 2015). However, the Web 2.0, the contemporary face of the Internet does not only provide tourists with information, but also makes it possible for the tourists to add their own feedback and to share their experiences via user-generated content (Chung, Koo 2015, Munar, Jacobsen 2014). Tourists document their trips on the Internet, share information, pictures and video clips (Boley, Magnini, Tuten 2013, Chung, Koo 2015), they write blogs (Bosagnit, Hibbert, McCabe 2015, Tseng et al. 2015), comment and rate the places they visited and the services they bought (Chung, Koo 2015).

They capture memories, choosing forms best suited to their own needs. For some it will be visual content such as pictures and video clips (Munar, Jacobsen 2014), for others it will be textual content, e.g. blog entries, where 'texts themselves play a significant role in representing the world of experience' (Bosagnit, Hibbert, McCabe 2015). In this way, the tourists share their travel-related comments, opinions, and personal experiences, that they think might be useful for other tourists who also are planning to visit that particular location (Xiang, Gretzel 2010, Munar, Jacobsen 2014).

3. 2. Information overload

Despite numerous facilitations and conveniences in everyday life communication, work and travel – the result of access to new technologies, the latter also have a negative impact on human life. The ever-broadening access to digital sources of information (the Internet, mobile applications, social media) their increasingly diverse functions and the vast amount of information reaching individuals lead to increased incidence of such phenomena as information overload (Ghose, Ipeirotis, Li 2012), data overload (Woods, Patterson, Roth 2002) and communication overload (Harper 2010). Similarly, in tourism industry, an overly extensive offer of tourism products (also distributed via the Internet) leads to choice overload (Park, Jang 2013). Internet users receive a multitude of diverse pieces of information which leads to problems with perception, selection and utilisation of the information according to one's own needs. This causes tiredness, anxiety and other negative emotions. The aforementioned phenomena are becoming severe problems in the contemporary society (Gomez-Rodriguez, Gummadi, Schölkopf 2014).

Conversely, behaviour classified as FoMO (fear of missing out) affects those users of the Internet and especially social media, who are concerned that important information will elude them while they are offline (Przybylski et al. 2013). Also, the increasing use of electronic devices in communication diminishes the importance of face-to-face contacts and causes such behaviour like phone snubbing or phubbing (Ugur, Koç 2015). Lack of access to new technologies, especially the Internet, while travelling can also cause irritation and negative emotions (Pearce, Gretzel 2012). Furthermore, overuse of electronic devices, in their various forms, can cause digital addiction (Lee et al. 2014).

3. 3. Unplugged tourism

Another interesting, albeit still niche, phenomenon has emerged in relation to the importance of new technologies in human life and is increasingly noticeable in the behaviour of tourists. The fatigue arising from overuse of the achievements of digital revolution and constant being online causes an 'anti-technological sentiment, sense of nostalgia and longing for a simpler, low-technology past and desire for unplugged holiday experiences' with individuals (Future Traveller Tribes 2030. Understanding tomorrow's traveller 2015). That is why they travel to places where they can rest and spend time in an interesting way, but at the same time where there is limited access or no access at all to new technologies, especially the Internet (Pearce, Gretzel 2012). They feel that the access to new technologies decreases the authenticity of their experiences and places that lack such access provide 'unique tourism experiences' (Paris et al. 2015). On the other hand, not all tourists value and desire this feature in the places they are visiting, as stated earlier (Pearce, Gretzel 2012).

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4. 1. Utilisation of social media before travelling

The participants of the study talked mainly about using social media in order to obtain information about their destination best suited to their needs. The majority of the interviewees used only the information published by other users (Trip Advisor, Booking.com, blogs) others searched in a more active manner, asked questions and participated in conversations in virtual

communities. In both cases the desired information pertained mainly to accommodation, sightseeing possibilities, tourist attractions (e.g. for children), the most convenient modes of transportation, weather conditions, local cuisine, etc. The participants also talked about their search for inspiration for sightseeing or leisure in a given place (e.g. by browsing photographs on blogs, predominately on Instagram or Pinterest). The information they gained were regarded as supplementary to their existing knowledge or as the beginning of search, especially valuable when the interviewees wanted to visit exotic places or participate in extreme forms of tourism, backpacking or camping. Another reason for using social media before a trip, again, mainly Trip Advisor and Facebook was the desire to know the opinions of other people on accommodation, restaurants, pubs, clubs, etc., both recommendations and warnings. The interviewees, however, stressed the need of maintaining distance as to the plausibility and reliability of such entries.

Those participants who sought information in a more active way used mainly Facebook, forums and blogs. Facebook was treated as a tool facilitating and accelerating access to diverse information (comments, links, photographs, and video clips) in one place (under the posted question) and from a large number of users (through sharing posts and mutual comments). In case of blogs and Internet forums the users commented on long periods of waiting for an answer as a significant disadvantage of this source of information. The places that were recommended by the participants' families and friends, also via electronic methods of communication, were regarded as better, more trustworthy and more attractive, however, as the interviewees stressed, 'electronic communication in this case did not supplant face-to-face communication'.

Regarding the information on possibilities of sightseeing, the survey participants were not interested only in obtaining basic information on the most important monuments, but they also wanted information on where to spend their time in a creative and non-standard way. The keywords used for browser searches were, for example, 'do as locals do in Rome', '10 unusual things to do in Barcelona', 'Stockholm off the beaten path', etc. The participants indicated Trip Advisor, Internet forums and, most commonly, blogs written by inhabitants, students, tourists and aficionados of a particular place and therefore being sources of unique pieces of information and stories. One interviewee compared visiting a city after reading about it on a blog to 'sightseeing together with an acquaintance who guides one through a city and tells stories about it'. This phenomenon mainly concerns sightseeing in cities that are well-known tourist destinations and is convergent with current trends, such as tourism off the beaten path, creative sightseeing and 'do as locals do' and also with Slow Travel.

There also were isolated, but highly critical and negative, opinions on searching for information on social media. These opinions were justified by the participants who indicated entries that were lacking credible sources, accusing authors of falsifying reality, e.g. by editing photographs and video clips, by advertisement-like and subjective characteristics of their content and general lack of trust towards information provided by unknown individuals on the Internet.

The above motivations and search methods pertained also to the stage when the trip was already underway. The interviewees talked about updating information, asking about details and thanking for the information that was given to them and also about adding their own recommendations and warnings.

4. 2. Utilisation of social media during travel

When asked about the reasons of publishing information about their trips on social media, the participants of the study stated that they wanted to capture memories and to document their travels for themselves, and their relatives and friends who did not travel together with them. They also wanted to share their emotions and experiences in real time. The interviewees mainly posted short text entries on Facebook (due to insufficient time or unwillingness to spend longer periods of time on social media) and pictures (using mobile applications, mainly Instagram), the check-in function, etc. Video clips were posted less frequently. One of the participants categorised photographs published in social media (Instagram and Facebook) into two groups: 'typical tourist photos: laying on the beach, swimming in the sea or swimming pools, landscape pictures of seaside and mountains' and 'pictures of things that are beautiful, interesting, intriguing, irritating, ugly or bizarre'.

Interestingly, some of the participants talked, with a certain dose of shame, that they wanted to brag about their travels and to make other people jealous by posting such entries and photographs (described as 'guilty pleasure'). The check-in function was regarded by one of the interviewees as 'more subtle, less intrusive and at the same time also serving to show where you currently are and what you are doing'. Creating blog or personal webpage entries was regarded by the majority of interviewees as overly time-consuming when done during a trip, however, three individuals regularly writing in their blogs (one person was writing about travelling) declared that they made effort to add new entries both in their blogs and other social media channels.

Some participants were strongly opposed to sharing information about themselves and their lives in social media. The causes of this aversion are diverse. The participants listed both security reasons (fearing burglary) and disdain for such activity of other people on the Internet (e.g. among their families and friends). They treated this behaviour as negative and embarrassing, criticising activity in social media as boasting, vanity, overly exposing one's private life, and a lack of common sense that can cause dangerous situations, such as the aforementioned burglaries.

The participants who were asked to compare their preferences in using social media in daily life and when travelling also were far from equivocal. A few individuals admitted that while they do not use social media on a daily basis, when they are on a trip or after they return, they post short text entries or photographs. Those who were critical of using social media when traveling declared that they were not using social media at all or reducing their use in everyday life to a minimum. As the reasons for this, they listed exhaustion form dealing with surplus information on the Internet, unwillingness to filter information, information noise and, as one interviewee remarked: 'wasting time on Facebook' and 'nonsensical scrolling the Timeline and checking out entries and photos and photos of friends'. The participants, however, had not had heard of unplugged tourism or disconnected tourism. After being given explanations, they equated their travel needs and expectations with this phenomenon.

The matter of authenticity of travel experiences juxtaposed with the need to be present in social media was also discussed during the focus group study. Again, the participants had differing views on this issue. They talked about the difference between sharing their impressions from their trips and the overly extensive use of social media that can, according to them, be borderline addictive. On the other hand, some of the interviewees reluctantly admitted to excessive use of social media. Documenting travel, understood as adding entries,

photographs and video clips, and communicating with family and acquaintances did not influence the authenticity of experience when travelling if such activities did not occupy significant lengths of time so that they become a main point of focus for the tourist. Incessant updates about the course of journey and checking their popularity on the Internet, photographing meals, unreflective photographing museum exhibits and publishing them without paying attention to the value and symbolism of the pieces, overusing the check-in function and disregarding companions by concentrating on social media presence are examples of negative social media related behaviour given by the interviewees. Those participants who disapproved of sharing any travel information in social media, agreed that the aforementioned activities negatively influence experience of travelling depriving it of enjoyment, waste time and distract.

4. 3. Utilisation of social media after returning

The majority of participants, when asked to compare their social media activity (understood as publishing new content) during the travel and after returning, declared greater activity during the latter period. Their motivations were similar to those occurring during travel. Adding new content, especially photographs, was regarded as an 'extension of the trip'. They also mentioned the possibility of reminiscence about the visited place, to 're-live' the trip. One participant remarked that publishing information while travelling stems from the excitement about the trip, and after returning it is caused by the desire to 'tidy up one's memories'.

After the trip ends, one can devote more time to social media activity (most frequently Facebook) and publish content related to their travel, choose the best photographs and even post-process them in image-editing software, and write detailed descriptions of visited places and monuments. Moreover, they brought to attention two issues that discourage them from posting content while travelling. Firstly, they did not always have appropriate access to Internet connections with good speed or there was no access to the Internet at all which made publishing more difficult. Secondly, data transfer, especially during trips abroad was regarded as overly expensive and the necessity to find free Wi-Fi connections discouraged them from devoting time for activity in social media.

Another activity performed by the interviewees after returning was publishing their positive and negative opinions and recommendations regarding the places they had visited, on such websites as Trip Advisor or Facebook. It was their method of 'summarising the trip', 'settling matters', 'praising what was good, criticising what was bad – flavourless food, unpleasant service, baggage misplaced at an airport, unattractive view from hotel room window'. They also mentioned that such information might be helpful for other users.

Interestingly, the participants also remarked that publishing reviews and opinions after returning does not carry the same emotional load as during travel. They talked about lesser excitement, less intensive wonderment than that felt during the trip while sightseeing, admiring landscapes, relaxing or sampling local cuisine. Negative emotions also changed with the passage of time, impacting the willingness to post entries on recommendation websites, such as Trip Advisor. The entries were less critical or the tourists refrained from posting them altogether.

There were also isolated cases of tourists who could not find the time to post social media entries after returning from travel and 'return to everyday life' due to professional or family duties. Lack of emotions related to travel also made them unwilling to publish

information about their trips, therefore, according to them, a better solution was to add content spontaneously and as soon as possible during the trip.

5. CONCLUSIONS: TOURIST IN SOCIAL MEDIA. ALREADY AN INSEPARABLE MARRIAGE OR STILL A LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP?

Returning to the question posed in the title of this paper: are tourists and social media already an inseparable marriage or still a long-distance relationship? On the basis of the study, an intermediate answer can be given. Among the tourists who think favourably of the functions of social media and use them regularly there are those who create their own content and also those who assume a more detached stance, being observers and information seekers. Enthusiastic opinions mix with those that are critical and negative. One can also observe a certain fatigue with high accessibility to new technologies and irritation with constant online presence in social media and exposure of one's private life therein. These stances are not mutually exclusive, and can fuse together and change according to individual needs and expectations of tourists.

The share of digital sources in the access to information and services and in communication is systematically increasing despite the emergence of negative trends and phenomena connected with the development of new technologies such as the aforementioned information overload, FoMO and digital addiction. The attitudes of contemporary tourists towards their online presence also during travel is shaped by the need to access information in real time, to share experiences and maintaining contact with family and friends. The popularity of social media encourages participation in online communities, motivates to creating one's own content and using available technologies. A contrary trend is also visible, characterised by unwillingness to use social media and even their functions themselves, and in a broader perspective, avoiding access to new technologies in travel.

The conducted studies allowed for discovering the needs of tourists and their opinions on using social media. Moreover, certain behavioural patterns also emerged. Needless to say, these needs and behaviour are shaped not only by individuals' needs and their digital competence, but also by the general digitalisation level of a country, the diffusion of innovations (technology, mobile applications, trends) and the availability of Internet solutions in a given country. The results of the studies can be interpreted as characteristic behaviour of contemporary tourists in a broader geographical context, not only pertaining to tourists from Poland but also to tourists from countries with similar development conditions of economy, information and communication technologies, and information society.

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