

SUSTAINABLE CUSTOMER DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE TOURISM RECOVERY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *The tourism sector has continued to be one of the most affected business units in 2020 in connection with a global pandemic. Numerous regions and tourist destinations, tourist hotspots and accommodations have been subjected to serious changes with a substantial economic impact. Thereby, the question arises as to whether the capacity to respond to customers' needs through functional digital engagement strategies is efficient for supporting a recovery and sustainable development of the tourism industry. This article comments on and provides a critical analysis of the recent online strategies related to content marketing applied to the tourism sector due to a global pandemic and the need to implement a different attitude towards tourism-oriented projects. The article proposes some examples of efficient policies that fit in with changes in the world tourism market.*

Key words: *sustainable tourism, customer engagement strategies, global outbreak, marketing trends and digital economy*

1. Introduction

What is the reality of tourism in 2020? As regards this topic, we would like to raise the question: what message has been transmitted to a wide range of stakeholders in regards to the importance of high-tech models and their implementation?

The impact of the pandemic, which started in 2019 and deepened in 2020, brought unusual situations for tourism companies and agents at both micro and macro levels:

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“Tourism has been hit hard, with millions of jobs at risk in one of the most labour-intensive sectors of the economy... the impact of the loss of demand in international travel could translate into: loss of 850 million to 1.1 billion international tourists, loss of US\$910 billion to US\$1.2 trillion in export revenues from tourism, 100 to 120 million direct tourism jobs at risk.” (UNWTO, 2020a).

Hence, fresh policy and new perspectives are on the table of prime importance in the framework of tourism, trade, and industry. The strategic plans and specific public policies for tourism have to be drawn by territorial managers at a state and/or local level (Lemos Baptista, Pocinho and Nechita, 2019). In this respect, the digital economy automatically meets the most varied customer requirements. Consequently, it can be assumed that the variations in level of digitalisation associated with e-business and implementing new technologies into the tourism SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) operations will be proportionally larger than shown in 2018:

Medium Digitalisation: computerised reservation system: > 40 % usage; interacting with suppliers: < 40 % usage; interacting with government services: > 30 % usage; analytics tool: ≥ 30 % usage; CRM system: < 30 % usage; mobile app: < 30 % usage; chat/instant online advice: < 20 % usage; online professional networks: < 20 % usage.

Low Digitalisation: email: > 80 % usage; basic office software: > 80 % usage; website: > 80 % usage; social media: < 80 % usage; Internet banking: < 80 % usage; specialist financial software: < 60 % usage; cash register: < 50 % usage; home working using the internet: < 50 % usage; online data storage: < 40 % usage; customer review/forum: ≥ 30 % usage; collaborative working online: < 30 % usage; specialist graphic software: > 20 % usage; computerised stock control system: < 20 % usage; staff intranet: < 20 % usage; computerised satisfaction survey: < 20 % usage; email marketing software: < 20 % usage; video conferencing: < 20 % usage; computerised ticketing system: < 20 % usage; property management system: ≥ 10 % usage (Dredge, et al., 2018: 18).

In fact, throughout and beyond the pandemic period intelligent software, web design, and digital marketing strategies have been taken forward with renewed energy aiming at supporting the development of more sensible and sustainable tourism practices. It refers, for example, to beneficial effects on the environment, and generating new employment opportunities (UNWTO, 2020b).

This article explores some of the next steps to discuss regarding the rapid changes in the world tourism market within the scenarios of transition to the digital platform and capacity of its adaptation to digital economy. Firstly, the literature review section reveals some up-to-date news regarding to the current economic situation in relation to the tourism industry. Secondly, it presents a critical analysis of innovative digital content marketing trends for tourism brands. Thirdly, the last section focuses on some pragmatic concerns linked to the benefits flowing from a digital tourism sector. The final remarks seek to sum up the outcomes of this study in the light of experience for the development of sustainable tourism practices in the digital age.

2. A Challenging Economic Backdrop in the Tourism Industry

The tourism industry is a rich source of career opportunities at different levels on every continent and a leading profitable sector in supporting global economy. While “global growth is projected to rise from an estimated 2.9 percent in 2019 to 3.3 percent in 2020” (IMF, 2020), “export earnings generated by tourism grew to USD 1.7 trillion, an increase of 4%, outpacing the world economy in 2018” (UNWTO, 2020a). Furthermore, “1.5 billion international tourist arrivals were recorded in 2019, globally. A 4% increase on the previous year which is also forecast for 2020” (UNWTO, 2020d). For the tenth consecutive year, “global tourism numbers and trends” are advanced in comparison to the global economy (UNWTO, 2020d). Nevertheless, the pandemic “has caused a 22% fall in international tourist arrivals during the first quarter of 2020., the crisis could lead to an annual decline of between 60% and 80% when compared with 2019 figures” (UNWTO, 2020a). In such conditions, for reopening and preparing the recovery of tourism, all over the world several projects based on digital contents have been accelerated with very strong increases. For instance:

“The Ministry [of Israel] as well as some local authorities has issued on-line virtual tours of sites and attractions around the country, in order to raise appetite and keep the postponed tours alive in the memory” (OECD, 2020).

“The Secretary of Tourism released a promotional video that will be disseminated, as part of a campaign that seeks to project the strength of Mexico as a tourism destination” (OECD, 2020).

Furthermore, several disturbing scenarios have still remained on the world stage that does not contribute at all towards growth of tourism-related services. Some clear examples are the following: Brexit’s effects for the travellers within the Schengen zone, adverse consequences associated with geopolitical tensions (e.g., in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Central America, Central Asia, East Timor, Laos, Middle East, most African countries, Myanmar, North Korea, Papua New Guinea, Ukraine, Venezuela), rising social tensions caused, for instance, by drug production and trafficking (e.g., Central America and Mexico), complex issues on risks to European security, extremist movements in Middle East and Africa, Hong Kong's protests, important matters such as poverty and inequality in India, evidence of rising wage inequalities, uncertain and stagnant economy in relation to the Russian and American markets, the considerable cost-of-living and salary range differences in EU member states, the collapse of travel agencies and airlines (e.g., Astral Holidays International, Flybmi, Avianca Brasil, Jet Airways, Thomas Cook, WOW Air, XL Airways). In this context, the fundamental role of alternative sources, such as digital products, that can tolerate risks at different levels and are able to provide a secure environment for visitors of high-risk countries, becomes evident.

Furthermore, a digitalized tourism sector can open a lot of possibilities for the future of digital economy through the functional aspects of its strategy. It is important to

mention that it provides a good basis for sustainable customer engagement procedures and at the same time sustained economic growth.

3. Innovative Digital Content Marketing Trends for Tourism Brands: Critical Analysis

Fresh perspectives and strategic planning on exciting content marketing demonstrations have become a major focus for tourism promotion organisations within the scope of the lockdown phase. According to several studies, individuals like the idea of going back to travelling, events, holidays and tourism-related activities (Civic Science, 2020; Boggs, 2020). However, as stated by *Destination Analysts* (2020). “Six in ten American travellers agree that if they were to travel now for leisure, they would not be able to fully enjoy it and half agree they have lost their interest in or taste for travelling for the time being” (*Destination Analysts*, 2020).

One more recent solid research by McKinsey & Company that was “fielded in 45 countries” and “conducted online in local languages on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis, depending on the region” indicates the statistics on consumer sentiment and behaviour given to a global pandemic. Some of the results show that “many consumers globally are continuing to see their incomes fall... even in countries that have partially reopened, consumer optimism remains muted and spending intent is still below pre-crisis levels” (Arora et al., 2020). The conducted research was centred on five themes that reflect consumer behaviour all over the world. They are “Shift to value and essentials”, “Flight to digital and omnichannel”, “Shock to loyalty”, “Health and caring economy”, and “Homebody economy”. Along with the second theme the majority of customers purchase online.

“In addition to e-commerce, other digital and contactless services—including curbside pickup, delivery, and drive-through service—are also seeing much higher adoption rates. While some of these habits are seen as a work-around to the crisis, many at-home solutions to regular activities will likely be adopted for the long-term” (Arora et al., 2020).

In addition, the described situation contributed to a resurgence of potential new trends around the world. They are the following: road trips instead of flight travels; wellness or outdoor experiences such as cycling and trekking tours and yoga retreats; staycations as a starting point for “stay local” campaigns for attracting visitors; the advantage of smaller to larger gatherings from which resulted new marketing messages like “go smaller”; large-scale musical and sport events most likely not reappearing until 2021 (Boggs, 2020).

Digital marketing in tourism industry defines its strategies based on the tools that are preferred by consumers. In fact, from a sample of 2000 American travellers surveyed, 61% of them declared using mobile phones for travel inspiration: 15, 8% frequently, 27, 6% sometimes, 13, 3% rarely, and 39% never (*Destination Analysts*, 2019). Regarding the use of mobile phones by travellers in order to find inspiration, the same study provided the following answers: “search engine for general web search: 69,8%; search engine for images or photos: 39,4%; social media websites: 36,5 %; online travel agency websites: 28,6%; airbnb.com: 24,7%; online video (YouTube.com, etc.): 20,3%; ask friends on

social media: 17,1%; official tourism office website: 16,2%; travel-related podcasts: 12,6%; map websites or mapping apps: 11,1%; e-mail travel newsletters: 9,9%; digital assistant (Siri, GoogleNow, Alexa etc.): 9,3%; user review websites: 8,6%; blogs, articles, or stories: 7,2%" (*Destination Analysts*, 2019).

At the level of digital marketing developments, there are several researches aimed at analysing tourism marketing across different networks and countries. Parlov et al. (2016, p. 142) performed a study on "analysis of marketing activities of tourism developed countries" for revealing the essential models of "trends in digital marketing in global digital surrounding". Furthermore, the study emphasizes some existing gaps in relation to marketing activities in Croatian tourism that can be relevant to other countries. Among the insufficiently considered aspects, Parlov et al (2016, p. 144) outlined the following: the system of promotion not being optimized and less balanced offline vs. online advertising; outdated visual identity and built around the national tourism brand; lack of the relevance for most of the regional and destination brands; missing of the special quality rating of accommodation facilities system; not having rating for other parts of destination offer (restaurants, bars, tourist infrastructure, etc.); lack of the consistent, hierarchically structured and efficient web platform; passive approach to digital marketing at regional and local level; too little focus on research.

A study on the engagement of tourist/traveller-generated content as the way of the destination branding strategy with references to Portugal, highlights the role of a "tourist/traveller as an opinion maker" who acts "as co-creators of brands", so "the content of the final output will be the result of the content generated by travellers", that "increases the chances that consumers will share the content with their own social network" (Oliveira and Panyik, 2015: 53, 71). In the category of tourist-generated content, the photos taken on the site and uploaded on the web can reveal the spatial patterns of tourists' activities as the geotagged photos can be used for analysing the perceived vs. projected image of the destination since the data can provide a hotspot distribution of tourist attractions (Nechita et al., 2019; Briciu et al., 2019).

Original contents of digital marketing have competed against each other. Among the most popular and frequently used are:

1. E-mags (e.g., *YGo*, *Destinations Travel*, *Business Travel*, etc.).
2. Kaleidoscopic blogs (e.g., *Stay Vacationed*: blog.diamondresorts.com; *Kaleidoscopic Travel*: kaleidoscopictavel.com.au/blog).
3. Discover videos (e.g., Lonely Planet x GoPro, 2018).
4. Romantic getaways and breaks (e.g., Marriott Traveler: traveler.marriott.com; QuirkyAccom: quirkyaccom.com/romantic-breaks).

In the most popular tourist sites locals open small tourist business rebuilding their houses or selling traditional craftwork, souvenirs, pastry, and drinks. However, they are still not ready to provide well-rendered travel content examples in comparison with large enterprises in the tourism sector that are prepared to meaningfully engage with their audience in electronic space. In most cases, small tourist brands advertise on platforms like *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter* and *YouTube*. There is also considerable confidence in such approaches that perfectly correspond to the customers' needs. In answering the question about the digital marketing strategies able to drive hotel

performance (a very important dimension in the tourism industry), it would be relevant to provide the data from the research on digital tactics that can positively influence online hotel bookings. According to De Pelsmacker et al. (2018, p. 50) the answer includes “having a digital marketing plan; using TripAdvisor information and metrics; using track software to analyse reviews on OTA [online travel agency] sites and OTAs management reports; providing fast and personalized response to guest reviews; encouraging guests to post comments; linking the website to TripAdvisor or other third-party review platforms”. By using them, the authors considered that it will lead to both a higher room occupancy and RevPar (revenue per available room) (De Pelsmacker, et al., 2018, p. 53).

Giving a brief summary of the above-mentioned aspects, it is necessary to underline some key concepts that point out a positive side of digital marketing. Firstly, it provides a great number of economic resources and employment opportunities within efficient, free and fast electronic space. Secondly, digital databases allow easy sharing of information on products and services, generally with comparisons of production costs and characteristics, and quality reviews, etc. Thirdly, fast e-operation settings, easy to build ready designs ensure high quality of services and customer satisfaction throughout the whole process. However, when creating travel content, it is essential to provide authentic realities in contrast to great-looking performances otherwise the brand will not have a competitive position on the market.

4. Tourism as Digital Entertainment: Is it Worthwhile Investing?

The recovery of tourism industry needs innovative and refreshing concepts and solutions to think forwardly and operate wisely (Liu et al., 2020). The recently launched ‘Safe travels’ stamp has become a key issue for the development of tourism industry [WTTTC, 2020]. Today it's a major challenge within the service industry reality to recover tourism “transforming this determination into concrete actions” and to “reimagine not only how we travel, but how tourism can help build a better future for people and planet” [Pololikashvili, 2020].

In fact, in the beginning of 2020, while the state of emergency was globally implemented, digital customer engagement tools contributed to the reimagination of possible scenarios for developing tourism alternatives and capacity-building efforts. Live broadcasts, online sessions with guides, 360° virtual tours for exhibitions and museums and other tourist attractions, personal reports by bloggers, electronic life-balance tests etc. were among a limited number of the unique providers that could offer a vivid, spatial imagination of sophisticated travel destinations. For example, weblogs have shifted from a niche communication format in less than a decade due to their power of influence toward a positive perception (Briciu, Briciu and Csiki, 2019).

Mastering a few easy digital techniques travel agents can engage customers to make good use of nature, spend time with locals, stay active navigating a boat or taking part in a relaxed outfit, observe how to cook delicious traditional recipes, and learn to be happy [Rent a Finn: What and When, 2020]. Indeed, some of the issues arise in the aforementioned context: is it worth investing in a digital tourism environment? Before

answering, categorizing all advantages of online tourism-oriented projects according to three dimensions: time-consumption, costs and delight, would be significant.

To reach a tourist destination with high tech instruments within seconds, without preparing suitcases, standing in line at international airports, getting a room in a hotel, crossing a huge museum in a hurry, without getting to know the impressive works etc. – all this underlines a less time-consuming virtual tourist experience. Furthermore, online travel activities provide opportunities to enjoy trip and leisure time with appropriate intervals and without delay.

In fact, live broadcasts and digital tourism-oriented sites are free and offer a variety of visual contexts, so customers can choose both paid and unpaid services. Generally, developers offer paid services for specific animation visits based on drone footage, animation, stills and 360° videos that usually is needed for owners of tourist facilities:

“The 360-degree panorama of the view from our Big Wheel has been vital to marketing it by persuading visitors the view is worth seeing. The Vintage Funfair tour was an ingenious way to show visitors to our website what’s inside what is essentially a big farm building” [360 imagery: other services, 2020].

The answer to the question of why millions of customers prefer websites rather than personal trips to take great delight of discovery is based on a variety of pragmatic concerns and, also, is hidden in psychological factors and cognitive behavioural models. The most significant positive feedback is that “more socially isolated users who are less emotionally connected in offline interactions and are more connected in online interactions” [Lee et al, 2020, p. 16] can fulfil their needs by joining online travel communities. The ways of interacting with the heritage is also built on a different concept and model of social interrelation and communication and relations of people to each other (Portalés et al., 2018).

Taking into consideration the issue on virtual tourism practices, is it important to admit that such patterns have for some time been globally accepted without great difficulties or contradictions. Quite the opposite, digital tours have been progressed so far that some extraordinary contexts are beginning to appear on the global tourism market. For instance, “a conceptualization of a multisensory virtual Port wine experience that includes a conceptual perspective and a technological solution proposal” [Martins et al., 2017] leaves inexperienced customers think about the mystery of its implementation. However, contemporary conditions may allow individuals enjoy new perceptions and interpretations in comparison with the past generations who are called to be witnesses of the appearance of the personal computer or innovative software types and computing tools. Nevertheless, it’s not yet the correct time to accept, as an example, the following social consensus of reality: “Food grown in laboratories and even 3D-printed are likely to become a part of the average diet” [Writer, 2019]. At the moment, in this scenario, for the humanity, it is still important the awareness of the presence of physical attributes in their authentic form (e.g., food, clothing, common facilities such as a swimming pool, sauna, spa, gym, etc.) for mental relaxation, health improvement and well-being. Precisely for this reason, popular Zoom calls become a profitable enterprise. The following example speaks for itself:

“What is the format of this virtual Port wine tasting? It is quite simple. We will make a zoom call and I will dedicate the first part of this virtual Port wine tasting to teach you about the history of Douro Valley, its terroir and the production process of Ports. The second part is when the real fun begins! You will grab your bottles of Port wines, I will grab mine, and we will do a virtual Port wine tasting together. We will go through each different style of Port wine and have a relaxed yet informative conversation about how to store, age and serve your Port wines...” [Riobom, 2020].

5. Final Remarks

In the age of transition to digital economy and increasing dependence on information technology, the tourism industry does not stay out of the digital creativity contest. On the contrary, high-tech customer engagement strategies ensure the quality of the services provided. Collaborative institutions and frameworks become an essential part for stakeholders' participation and awareness from the perspective of sustainable tourism development (Albu et al., 2016; Candrea et al., 2017).

In 2020, in the event of a pandemic outbreak, the world received an important message in order to seriously rethink its behaviour towards the planet. In the same year, tourism industry was significantly affected – “850 million to 1.1 billion fewer international tourist arrivals, US\$ 910 billion to US\$ 1.2 trillion loss in export revenues from tourism, 100 to 120 million direct tourism jobs at risk” (UNWTO, 2020e). However, even in such circumstances, a travel/tour/journey/voyage could happen through digital connectivity, efficient digital marketing space, and with the help of innovative technologies. Therefore, customer engagement strategies in tourism industry have been manifested in various ways and at several levels.

The opportunity to reset tourism into a sustainable way is seriously taken into consideration by many destinations previously known to be affected by overtourism (Venice, Barcelona, Thailand, Amsterdam, Machu Picchu etc), as well as other places like Mexico with its “Mexico Reborn Sustainable” campaign (The Economist, 2021; McClanahan, 2021). The context of the COVID-19 pandemic requires regional planning and development strategies based on the destination resilience concept in order to prevent and manage the overtourism effects (Fontanari, Traskevich and Seraphin, 2021; Traskevich and Fontanari, 2021). The post-pandemic tourism will be more linked with creative tourism as this kind of tourism is by definition designed for small groups (Remoaldo et al., 2020).

Tourists may use VR (virtual reality) applications to acquire experiences in simulated environments with unnatural objects or enjoy online means to perform tourist activities. Such practices are easy to monitor; they are less expensive and time consuming. In addition, it has absolutely minimal risk and harmful effects on a human health or environment. Owing to advanced AR (augmented reality) applications or informational displays travellers can obtain useful visual and audio contents on geographic locations, historical places, etc. AR can be a tool to support the relaunching of tourism after COVID-19 pandemic (Mohanty, Hassan and Ekis, 2020). However, it can considerably decrease the demand for services provided by tourist guides, but increasing necessity in

route consultants and designers. There are many opportunities for app development and implementation especially into cultural tourism area, and future researches should consider different perspectives of different tourist segments over the same tourism attraction (Briciu, Briciu and Kavoura, 2020).

The electronic tourism-oriented projects have numerous advantages in terms of time-consumption, costs and delight over the traditional ones. In addition, digital tours may provide e-promotions and e-booking windows that directly support digital economy. The digital tools like VR, AR and mobile apps allows also innovative solutions for people with special needs like visually impaired tourists (Cantero, 2018; Lam, Chan and Peters, 2020), with physical and motor disabilities (Mayordomo-Martinez et al., 2019), hearing impaired tourists (Nugroho et al., 2020), or families with disabled children (Tecău et al., 2019; Epuran et al., 2020), enabling „both tourists with and without disabilities to experience tourist products in the same way” (Ozdemir, 2021).

The common format tourism models have been recodified within the framework of digital transformation. The issue to be addressed both to computer science and engineering, which provide the development of digital technologies, and to worldwide clients is – What technologies and how these technologies do serve for the sustainability of tourism and help to preserve global balance?

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