SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MARKETING TOOL FOR GREEK DESTINATIONS

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Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) have to redefine their marketing strategies, in order to meet current challenges in tourism, such as the emergence of new tourism destinations, the intense competition, the change in the motivations and preferences of tourists, as well as the global economic crisis. On the other hand, social media are gaining prominence, as a cost effective marketing tool with high returns. In this respect, the aim of this paper is to investigate the use of social media among 325 municipalities in Greece for destination marketing purposes. The results show that Greek municipalities just begin to recognize the added value of this new marketing trend, since social media exploitation is still very limited and largely experimental. Subsequently, the social media strategy of the Greek Municipality of Ierapetra – 'Visit Ierapetra' – is analyzed and presented. In the analysis, social media usage patterns were identified that could serve as good practices for other municipalities in Greece, at a time when public sector cuts in their funding are requiring them to seek greater value in the way marketing budgets are spent. Findings and discussion of this study are useful to industry practitioners and academic researchers interested in the use of social media in destination marketing.

Keywords: *social media marketing, tourism destinations, destination marketing organizations, municipalities, Facebook, Greece*

JEL Classification:

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of new tourism destinations, the change in the motivations and preferences of tourists, and the intense competition in a rapidly and radically changing global environment, have forced destinations to seek more innovative marketing strategies in order to gain a competitive advantage. Moreover, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are under increasing pressure to demonstrate cost effectiveness and evidence the additional value which accrues from their marketing interventions. This pressure is exacerbated further by the continuing global economic crisis, its impact on their public spending resource allocation, and the subsequent drive for value-for-money. If DMOs cannot demonstrate this added value, they will face further budget reductions and the curtailment of their activities (Morgan et al., 2012).

On the other hand, destination marketing practices are greatly influenced by advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) due to the fragmented and information intensive nature of destination products (Cobos et al., 2009). Online information is now one of a primary influences on consumer decisions in nearly all major markets. Technological changes also impact on the way that destinations manage and market themselves. ICTs have changed the tourism industry in an unprecedented way, and to a degree that has not been seen in any other sector (WTO and ETC, 2008). In addition, one significant development in the ICTs are social media, which gain prominence as an element of DMOs marketing strategy, offering them the opportunity to reach a global audience with limited resources (Hays et al., 2013). In fact, the emergence of Web 2.0 and social media – two popular buzzwords today (Leung et al., 2013) – has resulted in an explosive increase of not

only travel-related content, but also applications and technology for effective destination marketing (Lee and Wicks, 2010; Sigala, 2009). In a marketplace where consumers become more demanding, distribution is more transparent and supply is increasingly competitive, keeping pace with the challenges will determine destinations' competitive positioning (WTO and ETC, 2008).

In an effort to contribute to the expanding literature and knowledge on social media strategies used by DMOs, this paper aims to explore the usage of social media among municipalities in Greece for destination marketing purposes. In recent years, Greece found itself in the midst of a deep economic crisis. At the same time, tourism is seen as the driving force behind country's economic recovery. However, Greece faces strong competition from countries characterized, by either enhanced quality and high differentiation tourism products (e.g. Spain) or from lower cost (e.g. Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia). Greece offers the same product as its competitors and claims a share of the same tourist markets (mainly tourists from countries of NW Europe). For these reasons, an important factor in maintaining the competitiveness of the country is an integrated, modernized and cost effective marketing strategy of the Greek tourism product. Consequently, the use of social media by municipalities in Greece for destination marketing purposes is of great importance. Subsequently, the social media strategy of the Municipality of Ierapetra – 'Visit Ierapetra' – is analyzed and presented, with the aim to identify social media usage patterns that could serve as good practices for other municipalities in Greece, at a time when public sector cuts in their funding are requiring them to seek greater value in the way marketing budgets are spent.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Bornhorst et al. (2010: 572), a tourism destination is "*a geographical region, political jurisdiction, or major attraction, which seeks to provide visitors with a range of satisfying to memorable visitation experiences*". Destinations are multi-dimensional. The

destination product is an amalgam of a diverse range of attractions, activities, people, scenery, accommodation, amenities, and climate, offering an integrated experience to consumers (Buhalis, 2000; Pike, 2008). Destinations are the most difficult tourism sector to market, because of their numerous stakeholders and complex product offer (Matloka and Buhalis, 2010). DMOs are usually regarded as the main bodies held responsible for the destinations marketing (Buhalis, 2000). Gretzel et al. (2006: 116) define DMOs as "*non-profit entities aimed at generating tourist visitation for a given area*". A DMO may belong to one of the following types (Pike, 2008):

- National tourism office (NTO). The entity with overall responsibility for marketing a country as a tourism destination.
- State tourism office (STO). The organization with overall responsibility for marketing a state, province or territory as a tourism destination, in a country that has a federal political system.
- Regional tourism organization (RTO). The organization responsible for marketing a concentrated tourism area as a tourism destination.
- Local tourism administration/Local tourism association (LTA). The organization responsible for marketing a small tourism area as a tourism destination. It may be a local government authority or a form of cooperative association of tourism businesses.

Regardless its type, size and structure, the role of a DMO is to enhance the long term competitiveness of a destination, by enhancing destination image, increasing industry profitability, reducing seasonality and ensuring long term funding (Pike, 2004). Towards that direction, the marketing and promotion of the destination to potential visitors is vital. However, there is no end of ways, in which a destination can be promoted, and in every destination community there is a diverse range of opinions on the tactics that should be employed (Pike, 2004). A considerable body of studies has emphasized that adoption of social media and other Web 2.0 tools, is one of the most important and effective ways for tourism enterprises and DMOs to enhance their competitiveness. According to Lee and Wicks (2010), there seems to be a general

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consensus that social media can play a vital role in marketing and promoting tourist destinations. The main types of social media sites are media-sharing sites (e.g. Flickr, YouTube), virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), blogging (e.g. Travelblog) or microblogging (e.g. Twitter), social bookmarking and voting sites (e.g. Delicious, Digg), review sites (e.g. TripAdvisor), social knowledge sharing sites (e.g. Wikitravel), and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn). Building on the foundation of Web 2.0, social media applications have facilitated unprecedented growth in human interaction in modern times (Lange-Faria and Elliot, 2012).

The emergence of social media has already started revolutionizing the tourism industry (Matloka and Buhalis, 2010) and various authors have highlighted the potential contribution of social media to a wide range of strategic and operational destination marketing issues, including the use of social media for brand awareness, reputation management, e-CRM, e-marketing, word-of-mouth effects and so on (Hamill and Stevenson, 2012). Social media offer DMOs with a tool alternative to traditional marketing to reach a global audience with limited resources and high returns. They provide an ideal platform to communicate with users and interact with them to gain more information about their interests, preferences, needs, wishes and demands (Maurer and Wiegmann, 2011). Hamill et al. (2012) summarise the potential business benefits for DMOs from proactive social media engagement under five main headings: market/customer knowledge and insight, engagement and reputation management, enhanced customer experience and loyalty, sales/marketing effectiveness, efficiency and return on investment (ROI), and finally, operations/internal processes.

A study regarding the response of DMOs to 'Travel 2.0' – a paraphrase of the term Web 2.0 in the travel and tourism sector – by Hamill et al. (2008), identifies three main clusters of the DMOs Web 2.0 adoption level: 'Non-Starters', that are DMOs with no or very limited use of Web 2.0 technologies, 'Cautious Adopters', representing some basic but limited progress and 'Progressive Adopters' that encourage interaction and user generated content (UGC) in the official portal site. Towards this direction, Milwood et al. (2013) evaluated social media

adoption among DMOs in United States and Switzerland. They found that while U.S. DMOs in recent years have begun to introduce various social media tools to their websites, Swiss DMOs appear to have been more cautious as they implemented comparatively less social media tools. It seems that the organizational framework of the DMOs plays an important role in social media adoption, as in some cases not only doesn't support but it inhibits the use of such tools. Hays et al. (2013) explored the usage of social media among the DMOs of the top 10 most visited countries by international tourists. They found that the majority of the examined DMOs are not currently utilizing social media to their full effectiveness when it comes to the ability to interact and engage with consumers. Moreover, they argue that social media is still not widely recognized and/or respected as a vital tool in marketing strategies, and thus is frequently underfunded and/or neglected.

Another study by Munar (2012) provides insights into social media practices and strategic considerations used by DMOs. It examines a theoretical model of generic social media strategies for destination management and applies qualitative methods to analyze the social media initiatives of DMOs of the Nordic countries. Her study provides empirical evidence of emerging social media strategies among DMOs and confirms the growing importance of these new media. Stankov et al. (2010) produced a primary assessment of the European National Tourism Organisations (NTOs) Facebook activity by examining their official presence on the network (nearly half of them had no Facebook account). Their research showed that most of NTOs have been slow to respond to the marketing opportunities brought by Facebook, as they do not use all the advantages that are offered by this form of user-generated content. In their research, Zouganeli et al. (2011) were also examined the way European NTOs adopt social media for their marketing. Using content analysis in their Facebook pages, they found that NTOs are struggling to fit in the new communication environment and to change their communication mentality. Chernysheva et al. (2011) focused on Mediterranean tourism destinations, with the aim to find how they use Facebook for destination branding. Their results suggest that only five

countries had a link for social network in their official website, in order to promote their national brands, while the majority of the countries didn't maximize the utility of Facebook as an important marketing tool.

In addition, Lange-Faria and Elliot (2012) provide a review of the literature on social media use by DMOs. Their main conclusion is that a growing number of travellers are influenced, by user generated content, presenting a number of challenges and opportunities to DMOs. They argue that the world has dramatically changed since the dawn of the Internet, moving from one where a destination could create a web page and use it in the same fashion as one might an online brochure; to one where users generate their own content. Matloka and Buhalis (2010) were also explored in their study emerging destination marketing opportunities originating from the development of user personalised content (UPC) tools regarding customised information that addresses travellers' personal needs and preferences. According to Sigala (2009), many city destination organizations, nowadays, have incorporated social networking features into their e-business model and strategy in order to further enhance communication with customers and benefit from the electronic word-of-mouth. For example, Yayli et al. (2011) examined the way European DMOs are leveraging Twitter to reach potential visitors by content analyzing their 'tweets'. Their main conclusion is that Twitter provides countless opportunities for DMOs to interact with customers first hand, and even tap on influential users who can create an even bigger impact for their brand.

To ensure that social media efforts will be effective and deliver high ROI on project spend, Hamill and Stevenson (2012) suggest that particular attention should be paid to measuring the '4Is' of social media performance both for individual social media channels and across all social media generally:

• Involvement – the level of customer involvement in various social media channels e.g. YouTube views, numbers participating in online communities, time spent, frequency, etc.

• Interaction – actions taken by online community members e.g. read, post, comment, review, recommend.

- Intimacy – the level of affection or a version shown to the brand; community sentiments, opinions expressed etc.
- Influence – advocacy, viral forwards, referrals and recommendations, social bookmarking, retweets etc.

However, while there is a growing body of research on social media use by the national tourism organizations (NTOs), the literature regarding the use of social media by municipalities focuses mainly on the issue of "e-government" and the interaction between municipalities and their citizens (Agostino, 2013; Bonsón et al., 2012; Guttormsen and Sæbø, 2013; Jones and Jones, 2010; Jørgensen, 2011; Kaigo and Tkach-Kawasaki, 2012; Klang and Nolin, 2011; Sandoval-Almazan et al., 2015). Consequently, more knowledge is needed to explore the level of social media usage by local municipalities for tourism destination marketing purposes.
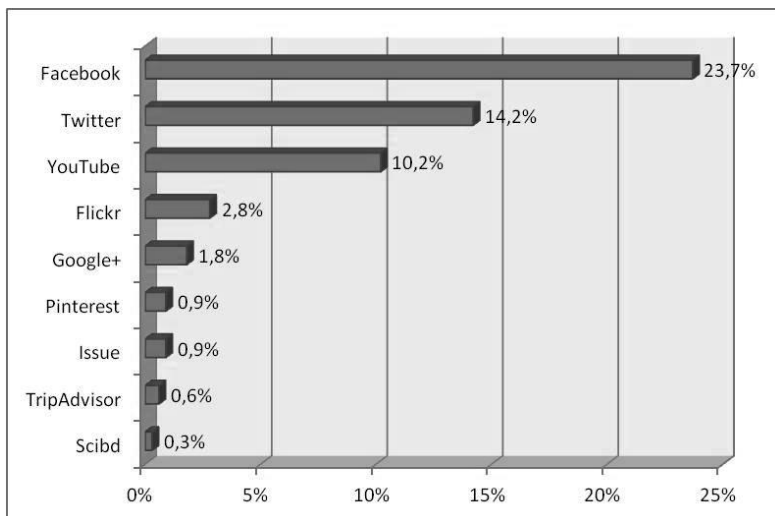
METHODOLOGY

The study of this paper focuses on the use of social media by Greek municipalities and the research process that was adopted includes several steps. Firstly, all the official web pages of Greek municipalities (325) were accessed, in order to find which – if any – social media links were available. This was done because the sheer number of pages in social networks using the name of the region of the municipality or claiming to be the region's main representative page is overwhelming. Hence, only through a social media link on the municipality website one can ensure that this page is the official one. Secondly, the research focused on the dominant social network, namely Facebook. All the available Facebook pages were visited and content analysis was applied in order to identify and record some structural features of them, such as the name of the page, date of creation, number of fans, etc. Data was collected by two researchers cross validating each other's data. The research took place in the period April-May 2013. Subsequently and as a case study, the social media strategy of the Municipality of Ierapetra – 'Visit Ierapetra' – is analyzed and presented, in order to identify social media usage patterns

that could serve as good practices for other destinations and DMOs, especially for other municipalities in Greece. In order to meet this objective, semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with four members of the team responsible for the 'Visit Ierapetra' project, in order to gain a wide range of information about their social media marketing activity. The four interviews took place during May 2013.
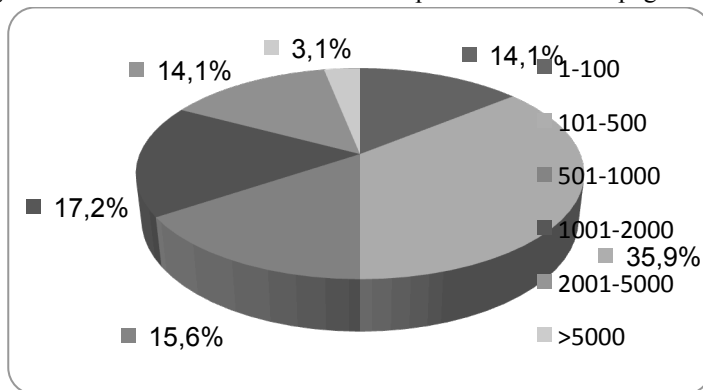
FINDINGS

As mentioned above, the first focus of the research was to explore the existence of an official presence of Greek municipalities on social media. From the 325 official web pages of Greek municipalities, only 77 of them provided a link to their Facebook page (23.7%), 46 had an account on Twitter (14.2%) and 33 municipalities (10.2%) had their own channel on the video sharing platform YouTube (see Figure 1). These three social media platforms seem to be the most popular for exploitation by municipalities. The usage of other social media is limited and its percentages are extremely low: 2.8% of the municipalities have an account on Flickr, 1.8% on Google Plus, 0.9% on Pinterest and Issue, 0.6% on TripAdvisor and just one municipality has a page on Scribd (0.3%).

Figure 1 Social media usage by Greek municipalities

The number one social network is Facebook. For this reason, the research was focused on the analysis of the presence of the 77 municipalities on this site. Facebook offers different choices for creating a profile, such as personal profiles and pages. Personal profiles are for individual, non-commercial use. On the other hand, pages offer businesses, organizations and brands more features than regular profiles. The organizations can customize their pages by adding applications, posting stories, photos and videos, hosting events and more. Only the official representative of an organization or a business is permitted to create a page. Users can interact with organizational pages and can become fans of a page instead of becoming friends with other users. Pages provide insights to help their administrators understand how people are interacting with the page. Taken that DMOs are organisations promoting their destination brand it follows that a 'page' is the right choice. Nonetheless, 13 of the 77 municipalities (16.9%) have not yet realized the difference and have chosen to use a personal profile instead of a page. That is of course against the terms of use and consequently the other 64 pages (83.1%) considered valid and analyzed.
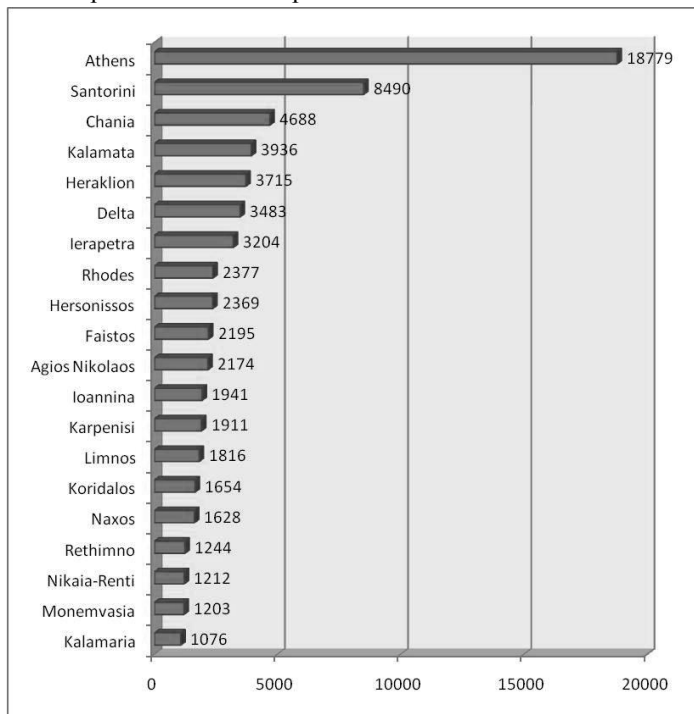
Figure 2 Number of fans in Greek municipalities' Facebook pages

Undoubtedly, the number of fans in a Facebook page defines the size of the online community build around a destination. In the case of the Greek municipalities this size varies from very small communities (16 fans) to larger ones (18,779 fans) (last measured in 28/05/13). As one can see on Figure 2, half of the municipalities have less than 500 fans, a number significantly low. Only the 3.1% of the municipalities has managed to attract more than 5,000 fans. However, the authors have to highlight that these numbers are growing each day. Figure 3 illustrates the top-20 municipalities according to their number of fans. Athens is a clear winner of Facebook fans while Santorini is in the second-place. The number of fans, however, is quite low in relation to the actual popularity of most destinations, showing a clear lack of social media strategy by the municipalities. Moreover, there are some unofficial pages for the same regions that have much more fans than the official pages. It is also surprising the fact of the absence from this list of both some big cities of Greece (e.g. Thessaloniki, Patra) and some famous tourism destinations (e.g. Kos, Corfu, Mykonos). Obviously the number of fans seems not to correlate with the population of the municipality or the number or tourists that actually visit the destination (perhaps with the exception of Athens and Santorini). There are examples of small towns, which are not among

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the popular tourism destinations in Greece that have managed to climb to
the top ten destinations with the more fans (e.g. Ierapetra).

Figure 3 Top-20 Greek municipalities based on number of Facebook fans

In addition, most of the municipalities use the name 'Municipality of
…' for their Facebook page or accompany their name with more official
terms. This can be attributed to the fact that Facebook is still an unknown
terrain for many tourism marketers, who are trying to grasp the do's and
don'ts of the new trend. Other municipalities exclusively use their region
name (e.g. Rhodes) or a combination of the region name with words like
'visit' (e.g. Visit Loutraki), 'travel' (e.g. Travel Tripolis) or different
variations (e.g. Breathtaking Athens), a clearly marketing approach. At

this point, one should underline another important note. We do know that an online community cannot be considered as a homogenous sum of people. Researchers noted that a significant part of the municipality community comes from the destination residents, at least at an initial stage. With this in mind, two other findings can also be explained: 1) content posted in the Greek language, and 2) bilingual posts (English plus Greek language). In fact, the research showed that only 13% of the municipalities keep a different page for tourists and locals. The majority of them (87%) have a common page both for tourists and residents. As a result, the 57.8% of the content published by the municipalities in their pages is informative for locals, 17.2% is promotional for tourists, and the remaining 25% is a mix of tourist and local information, a faulty practice since the target groups needs and interests are very different (Figure 4). It is important to mention that at this early phase of Facebook adoption by municipalities, the travel-related content is primarily promotional, with the goal to raise brand awareness and thus aiming at the pre-trip stage.

Figure 4 Type of Facebook posts by Greek municipalities
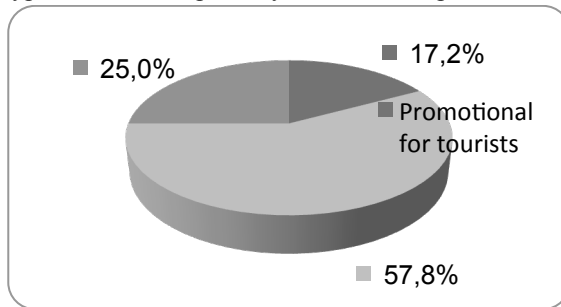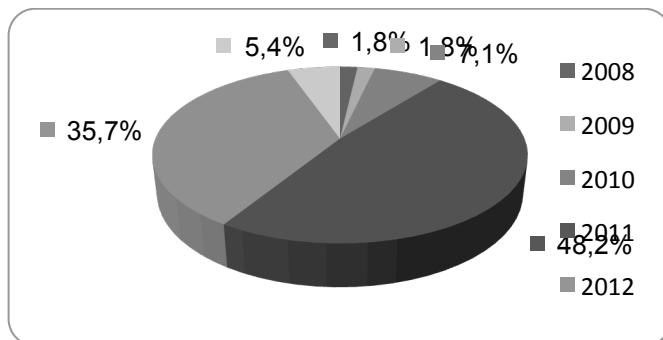

Figure 5 Year of Greek municipalities' Facebook page creation

Finally, considering that the oldest municipality Facebook page was created in 2008 (Figure 5), it is obvious that we are talking about a relatively recent trend that goes back no longer than six years. However, about half of the municipalities (48.2%) created their pages in 2011, while another 41.1% joined Facebook in the last two years. These numbers show that social media marketing exploitation by municipalities in Greece is something really recent and new – but also rapidly growing.

THE CASE OF 'VISIT IERAPETRA'

The coastal town of Ierapetra is located on the southeast part of Crete. It is the fourth most populous town in Crete with 16,139 inhabitants (2011). Its economy is based mostly on agriculture (olive oil, vegetables, and fruits) and secondarily on tourism. The average annual temperature of 19.7 °C (67 °F) enhances these activities. Apart from the excellent climate, the area is famous for its geomorphology, together with the rich natural, cultural and social resources. Compared with other famous tourism destinations in Crete (e.g. Chania, Heraklion, Rethymnon, Hersonissos, Malia, Elounda, Agios Nikolaos) is one of the least known destinations on the island. Its tourism development is based mainly on the 3S model (sea, sun, sand). In 2013, tourist arrivals in the wider area of Ierapetra reached 127,000, a number that is considered small compared

with the 3,335,500 tourists who in total visited Crete in the same year (SETE, 2014).

'Visit Ierapetra' is the official tourism e-marketing campaign of the Municipality of Ierapetra. It was decided to incorporate 'visit' in the name of the campaign to denote the organization focus and respond to the shift in recent years away from the more bureaucratic sounding names that are representative of municipality divisions (Pike, 2008). The campaign is the outcome of the collaboration between the tourism board of the Municipality of Ierapetra and the Department of Commerce and Marketing of the Technological Educational Institute of Crete. This cooperation was established in July 2012 with the aim to utilize e-marketing tools (especially Web 2.0 applications), in order to enhance awareness and improve perceptions and images of Ierapetra as a tourism destination within the target markets (Germany, UK, France, USA, Italy and the rising markets of Russia and Israel). The Municipality of Ierapetra, as many other municipalities in Greece, faced public sector cuts in their funding and budget reductions for tourism promotion. As a result, the tourism board of the municipality decided to reduce traditional promotion actions that are expensive (e.g. participation in tourism exhibitions, production of brochures, etc) and focus on alternative cost-effective ways of promotion. Following the redesign and relaunch of the municipality tourism website (http://www.ierapetra.gr), the time was right to support this with a proactive social media marketing strategy. At this point it is important to mention that the main body responsible for the promotion of Crete as a tourism destination is the Region of Crete. Nevertheless, in the island of Crete there are many municipalities that directly compete with each other as tourism destinations as they usually targeting the same markets. That means that each municipality, represented by its local tourism administration has its own marketing goals (which may differ or be the same as those of the Region and other municipalities), has its own budget for promotion and develops its own tourism campaign. In this context, the overall objective of the project was to develop and implement a proactive, integrated and coordinated online marketing strategy – one that fully leveraged emerging social media

opportunities. Based on the above, the following key strategic objectives were agreed:

•   Build brand awareness - discovery of a relative unknown destination in Crete.

•   Show the beauty of the area: beaches (many big and small crystal-clear beaches) – about 45km of beach area in total, nature (gorges etc), town (attractions, life, nightlife), taste (local specialties, products, raki, food), events (festivals, concerts, especially during summer).

•   Raise and maximize positive e-Word-of-Mouth about the area.

•   Attract more visitors from abroad (inbound tourism).

•   Attract more visitors from Greece and Crete (domestic tourism)

•   Attract more visitors from abroad that are currently visiting some other parts of Crete.

Towards achieving these goals, a number of social media profiles were created across different platforms, such as Facebook, Flickr, Pinterest, Youtube, Twitter, Foursquare etc. It was decided that most weight would initially go on Facebook, as it is the most popular social network to date (eBizMBA, 2014). It is important to note that most of the other social media accounts were on trial basis and depending on initial results, more weight will be given in the future on the most promising ones of these. Maintaining many social accounts is a very time-consuming process, so it is virtually impossible to give the same attention in all of them.

The importance of photography

Photography is the most shareable item on social media (Ipsos, 2013) and one of the most powerful media (along with video) to showcase a destination to potential visitors. It was therefore crucial for the success of the project, the use of high quality material to publish across media. Initially, there was some research on the archive of photography owned by the municipality, but the results were rather disappointing. Most available photography was either old, low-resolution, not available in digital format or had unclear copyright. It was obvious that the project

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could not rely on this material and therefore new photos had to be acquired. Also, it was decided that most photography should be under Creative Commons license to encourage distribution and spread (Creative Commons, 2013). To acquire high quality photographs at the minimal cost, the people responsible for the project teamed up with skilled amateur photographers of the area that offered their material voluntarily. Acquired photography was used across all social media.

The marketing strategy on Facebook

The profile on Facebook is located in facebook.com/visitierapetra. The main publishing strategy included use of high-quality photography, watermarked with the location information (*"area of Ierapetra, Crete"*). Posting of photos (or stories) was performed 1 to 3 times per day (morning, noon and late evening). Furthermore, collaboration was launched with well-established (with many fans/likes) Facebook pages with relevant content in order for them to re-post (share) content to their fans, thus distributing the material to a much wider audience. This was one of the most important aspects for the success of the campaign, as it is very difficult to initially establish a good fan base at the beginning of a new page. Teaming up with existing pages of related topics can have a benefit to both parties, as they are usually looking for content that a DMO can provide and they will publish it to their wide fan base. Providing a link to the DMO's page when they post its content, is usually enough for a acquiring a respectful amount of fans with every post.

One very important decision was whether there would be one Facebook profile for everything that had to do with the municipality, both tourist and local information. It was clear that a common profile for both tourists and citizens would probably cause a number of serious problems. The main concern was the possibility the profile to end up a place of argument and expression of distress of the local population, mainly due to a general hostility towards the municipality and the elected officials. Also the target groups of tourists/visitors and locals are very different and it was concluded that mixing up tourist and municipality information could
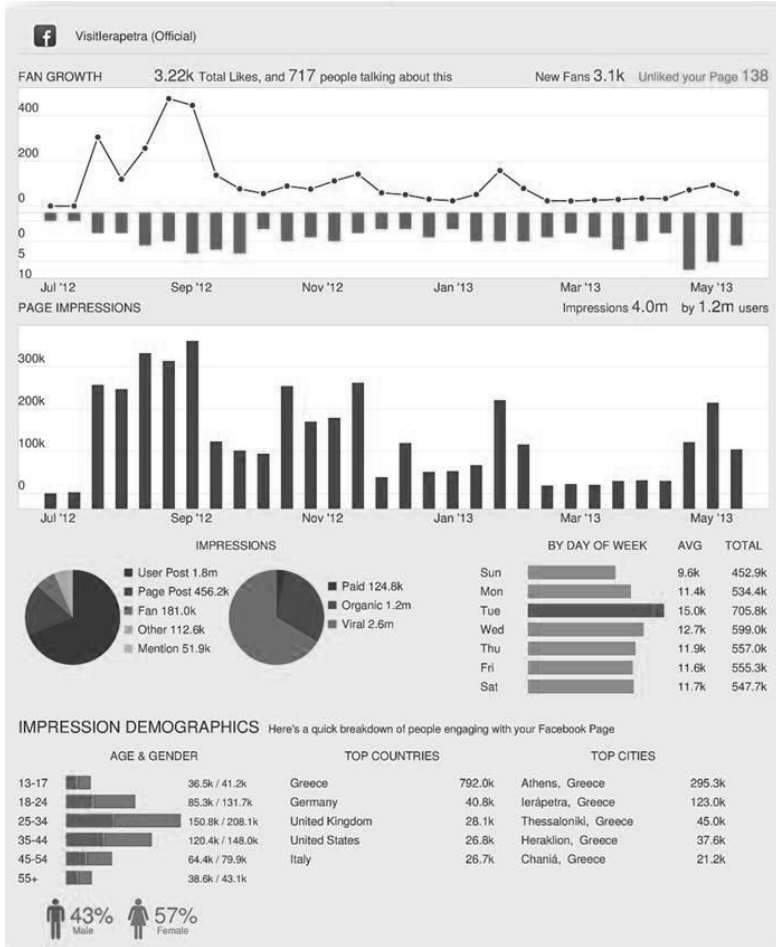
only cause confusion and problems. Therefore, it was decided that there should be two separate profiles, one for municipality issues and one for tourist information.

The focus of this study is clearly on the tourist information profile which shares only tourist-related information. Also, it was very important for the main language to be English, along with Greek and other language whenever it was possible. An interesting finding after a year of service, and studying the comments of the posts, is that although there were many residents of the area fans of the page, they rarely posted any negative comments, but instead they were proud for the beauty of their area, and clearly understood the purpose of the profile. Their help in spreading the content was actually very important, as they were very frequent "sharers" of content.

Results

By using social media, Ierapetra achieved in the first year (July 2012 – May 2013) hundreds of thousands impressions of advertising content to potential visitors around the world. Achieving this in any other traditional advertising form would be much more expensive, and particularly difficult to achieve it in all these countries (Greece, Germany, UK, USA, Italy, France, Israel etc.). It is also noteworthy the continuous availability of highly useful statistics that are available through Facebook insights (Figure 6) and other social media analytics, showing preferences and interests of potential visitors along with experiences of those who already visited the area. Furthermore, although paid advertising to gain new fans was used very little, due to budget limitations, the results were very promising and the cost very low. Finally, collaborating with well-established profiles of similar topics resulted to greatly augmenting the impressions to millions, at no additional cost.

Figure 6 'Visit Ierapetra' Facebook Statistics

CONCLUSION

Social media are gaining prominence as an element of DMOs marketing strategy at a time when public sector cuts in their funding. This require for them to seek greater value in the way that marketing budgets

are spent. Tourism organizations that do not adopt social media will lack a competitive advantage. However, what could be more detrimental than not understanding or adopting social media practices is using such practices in a poor manner (Hays et al., 2013). As Shao et al. (2012: 96) mention: "*the social media wave is only gaining in momentum and drowning in it is a real danger for many DMOs*". In fact, social media pose both opportunities and challenges for DMOs.

The results of the primary research conducted in the study of this paper confirm the findings of the literature review about the limited and slow progress made by DMOs, in responding to the marketing opportunities brought on by social media. Despite the importance of keeping up with technological developments, most municipalities in Greece seem not to be familiar with the new Web 2.0 technologies. The results showed that social media usage among Greek municipalities is still very limited and largely experimental. Greek municipalities are only just beginning to understand and appreciate how they can use social media to promote themselves. Undoubtedly they could be considered as 'non starters' or 'reluctant adopters'. The low levels of technology adoption by the Greek DMOs confirmed also by Sigala (2013) who found Greece to be very slow and delayed in the development and adoption of successful destination management systems (DMS) at national, regional and local destination levels.

A successful social media presence requires an understanding of mechanisms of these sites. Jorgensen (2011) argues that social media must be managed by skilled people, but municipalities do not necessarily have social media experts employed who can ensure a beneficial presence. In addition, municipalities have other aspects on top of this to consider as they are public organizations. It seems that marketers are still searching for ways to commercially exploit social networks potentials and as a result they are still holding back and sticking to well known promotion models (Slivar, 2009). It is more than clear that most municipalities need to rethink their current approach and take substantial action if they are to fully exploit the potential of social media in the future (O' Connor, 2011).

This study attempts to create knowledge that will help destinations to improve the effectiveness of their e-marketing strategies and plans, enabling them to make the best possible use of social media in marketing, and ultimately to be more competitive in the global marketplace. The case of 'Visit Ierapetra' is an excellent example of how a local administration can achieve effective destination marketing with a limited budget. Municipality of Ierapetra in response to the new economic situation formed in Greece in recent years decided a shift from traditional ways of marketing to alternative cost-effective ways of promotion by exploiting social media. In this way, municipality achieved the diffusion of its promotional material to hundreds of thousands potential visitors in its target markets. Although no one can say if these online viewers will evolve into actual visits and bookings – visitor surveys could probably give an answer to that – it is recognized that the project has successfully achieved some of its key goals and objectives, especially in relation to brand awareness and e-Word-of-Mouth raise. With growing recognition of the potential of social media, it can be expected that more and more municipalities in Greece and other local tourism administrations and DMOs will engage in the future with social media for their destination marketing. While the low levels of technology adoption by the Greek DMOs do not allow the complete replacement of traditional marketing channels by e-marketing and social marketing (at least not yet), these new networks could work complementary with other marketing channels creating positive effects to tourism destinations.

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