

## THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON TRAVELERS 2.0

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*Social Media (SM) are one of the latest and most typical examples of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which have been widely adopted in the tourism industry at all stages of a trip. The objective of this paper is to investigate the impact of SM on travelers 2.0, as well as their views concerning relevant issues. A survey was conducted to analyze the behavior of travelers 2.0, using a sample of 250 individuals from October to November 2013. The research findings revealed that the reasons for which travelers 2.0 use SM depend on each stage of the trip. Travelers 2.0 are influenced by the different elements / services provided through SM, but to a different extent; as this influence increases, it is more likely that holiday plans will be altered accordingly. Despite the influence of SM on travelers 2.0, they still have not gained their confidence and trust.*

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**Keywords:** *social media, social networking sites, e-tourism, tourism services, travelers 2.0*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is one of the major industries that have been closely related to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) developments. The influence of ICTs and particularly the Internet upon tourism is strong and multifaceted. The use of Internet services is a key factor for the increase of efficiency and promotion of tourist products worldwide at a low cost (Drosopoulou, 2012).

The growth of social media (SM) has caused significant changes leading to a different way of managing tourism businesses (Kavoura & Stavrianea, 2014). A lot of research has been focused on the impact of SM on users' lives and companies' performance, since the vast majority of tourism organizations showed a growing interest in the opportunities created by the mass and rapid spread of SM (Leung et al., 2013). SM are defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as "a group of Internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and which allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC)". This definition is accepted in the context of this paper. Furthermore, Cohen (2011) summarized thirty SM definitions regarding different perspectives, as SM continue to evolve and their uses change and expand. In the tourism sector, Web 2.0, also referred to as "Travel 2.0", changes the online travel industry, since travel planning and booking on the Web are among the most popular online activities and online travel sales are growing at an explosive rate (Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). Travel 2.0 includes different applications, such as media and content syndication (RSSfeeds), mashups, tagging, wikis, Web forums, travel communities, customer rating and evaluation systems, podcasting, blogs, microblogging, photo sharing, and video sharing. The effective penetration of SM technology in the tourism sector has enabled users/travelers 2.0 to interact with businesses (Ye et al., 2011).

This paper aims to investigate the impact of SM on travelers 2.0, focusing on particular aspects, such as the use of SM types, the use of SM at all stages of traveling, the views of travelers-users about the

information provided through SM, as well as their views about the trustworthiness of this information. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: the next section provides a summary of previous studies and researches in this field. Following that, there is a section that presents our research hypotheses and the methodology adopted, which is built upon an online survey. The findings of the research are presented in a following section; conclusions and future research directions are summarized in the final two sections.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

It is a fact that ICTs have transformed the tourism industry, changing radically the way that businesses operate (Dodd & Johnson, 2011). A recent comprehensive literature review about SM in tourism and hospitality (Leung et al., 2013), from both the consumers' and suppliers' perspective, revealed that although extant research generally paid more attention to suppliers' application of SM, the successful practice of SM still remains largely unknown to scholars and practitioners. Furthermore, regarding the specific stage of the traveling process, the use and impact of SM on the research travel planning process, particularly the information search in the "pre-trip" phase, was overemphasized among customer-centric studies. Before and during trips, tourists use SM to gain information about the means and conditions of the trip, share their experiences, and compare destinations and services related to traveling (Parra-López et al., 2011). According to the latest findings of a review study of Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), SM research in tourism is still in its infancy, although it has been increasingly broadening and deepening its interests. Therefore, they identify gaps in the current research literature, in particular with regard to "the impact of SM on travel behaviors during the trip, the local community's social and cultural aspects, and the different impacts of SM between SM users and non-users".

This section deals with assessing and discussing previous but recent (after 2010) primary research investigations, related to the impact of SM on tourists, focusing on particular issues, such as: the SM type used, the tourists' profile, their use at all stages of traveling, their specific application areas, the views of users about the content that tourism companies share in these pages, and finally the trustworthiness and the level of user satisfaction.

Table 1 lists selected articles related to the impact of SM on tourists, based on the above mentioned research objectives and their research focus. Each article was carefully read through by the two authors of this paper in order to analyze and classify its content. As several studies included SM research on a lot of issues, a study could be assigned to more than one research objectives.

Table 1. Previous empirical investigations regarding the impact of social media on tourists/travelers

| <i>Research area</i> | <i>Research focus</i>   | <i>References</i>                                       |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Social media types   | Search engines and social networking sites  | Xiang & Gretzel (2010)                                  |
|                      | Travel blogs  | Volo (2010)   |
|                      | Online reviews  | Sparks & Browning (2011)                                |
|                      | Facebook; The effects of online social media on tourism websites (Facebook and Twitter); Types of social media used | Milano, Baggio & Piattelli (2011); Yoo & Gretzel (2012) |
|                      | Primary online social networks used for travel purposes & users' perceived experience                               | Nusair, Erdem, Okumus & Bilgihan (2012)                 |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
|   | Virtual communities & mobile platforms   | Buhalis & Foerste (2014); Lange-Faria & Elliot (2012); Xiang, Wang, O’Leary & Fesenmaier (2015) |
|   | Twitter  | Sotiriadis & Zyl (2013)   |
| Tourists’ profile & tourists’ behaviour | Consumer narratives  | Tussyadiah, Park & Fesenmaier (2011)  |
|   | Influence of personality, patterns of use, impacts on trip planning, characteristics of travel-related social media users and creators | Yoo & Gretzel (2011, 2012)  |
|   | Statistical measures about the use of social media in tourism by World Travel Market   | Santos -Sticky-media.com (2012)   |
|   | How the use of social networks affects the way people travel   | Lab42.com (2012)  |
|   | Implications of user-generated content   | Wilson, Murphy & Cambra Fierro (2012)   |
|   | The use of SM throughout a trip among travelers-residents of the Former Soviet Union Republics   | Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides (2012)  |
|   | Effects of SM on Greek youth tourism   | Bizirgianni & Dionysopoulou (2013)  |
|   | Users of social networking sites from Korea  | Kim & Tussyadiah (2013)   |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
|   | Scandinavian tourists' perceptions, types of content creators | Munar & Jacobsen (2013, 2014)   |
|   | Twitter users behaviour                                       | Sotiriadis & Zyl (2013)   |
| Role of social media at all the stages of a journey / traveling process: before, during, and after the trip | <i>“pre-trip” stage</i>                                       | Burgess, Sellitto, Cox & Bultjens (2011); Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides (2011); Huang, Basu & Hsu (2010); Lab42.com (2012); Lee (2011); Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung & Law (2011); Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño & Díaz-Armas (2011); Sparks & Browning (2011); Xiang & Gretzel (2010); Yoo & Gretzel (2010, 2011, 2012) |
|   | <i>“during-trip” stage</i>                                    | Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides (2011); Kim & Tussyadiah (2013); Lab42.com (2012); Lee (2011); Munar & Jacobsen (2013); Sparks & Browning (2011); Tussyadiah, Park & Fesenmaier (2011); Zehrer, Crotts & Magnini (2011)   |
|   | <i>“post-trip” stage</i>                                      | Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides (2011); Huang, Basu & Hsu (2010); Lab42.com (2012); Lee (2011); Munar & Jacobsen (2013); Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño & Díaz-Armas (2011); Yoo & Gretzel (2011, 2012)  |
| Trustworthiness and level of user satisfaction  |   | Burgess, Sellitto, Cox & Bultjens (2011); Munar & Jacobsen (2013); Sparks &   |

|  |  |                                       |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
|  |  | Browning (2011); Yoo & Gretzel (2010) |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|

### ***THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TYPES***

The growth of SM webpages has caused many changes globally in the way that the tourism industry has been developed (Kalala, 2011). SM offer a number of different applications for their members who want to communicate more and more in order to share information and experiences. Therefore, SM are becoming increasingly important for the tourism industry (Senders et al., 2013).

Various types and applications of SM currently exist and new SM webpages appear online every day. Using these various forms of SM, a growing number of online users become increasingly involved in various online activities by consuming, participating, and generating content online. Among these various types of SM used by travelers, travel blogs were identified not just as a good platform that can communicate travel experiences outside of the narratives of tourism marketers, but also as an effective tool for promotion, product distribution, management, and research (Volo, 2010). In terms of SM types used, the findings of previous studies (Xiang et al., 2015; Ayeh et al., 2013; Leung et al., 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) indicated that the majority of online users just use the content posted by others and only a small number of them create online content including text, images, audio, and video. Based on the findings of two national surveys on travelers' SM use, conducted in the United States in 2008 and 2010, online travel agency and auction sites (Expedia, Travelocity, Priceline, etc.), general search engines (Google, Yahoo!, etc.), and service provider websites (airlines, hotels, rental cars, etc.) were most prominently used in online travel searches. However, pure SM sites like blogs and communities, as well as photo/video sharing sites and social networking sites are also used in the context of online

travel planning. Travel reviews are the most prominent form used followed by photos posted by others, which were also frequently used as input in their travel planning process. Audio files/podcasts and tweets are only used by a minority of online travelers who use SM (Yoo & Gretzel, 2012).

Another research, conducted among US travelers in 2010, examined the primary online social networking sites used for travel purposes (Nusair et al., 2012). When the respondents were asked to select their favourite online social networking site for travel related purposes, 72 per cent of them indicated that Facebook was their favourite social networking website for travel related purposes. YouTube was ranked in the second position (12 per cent), while 4 per cent indicated MySpace as their favourite one; only 1 per cent indicated TripAdvisor as their preferred website and about 5 per cent other websites. Moreover, Milano et al. (2011) concluded that online social networks (OSN), like Facebook and Twitter, have positive impact on tourism website views, enhancing the business websites' popularity, based on an analysis of the pattern of visits to a sample of Italian tourism websites.

With a significant amount of information available to travelers, the Internet is an important platform for the exchange of information between customers and companies in the tourism industry (Parra-López et al., 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). During the last years, several researches have been conducted in topics related to the use of SM in tourism (Amersdorffer et al., 2012). A noteworthy research was conducted by Xiang and Gretzel (2010), which stresses that when a user searches for tourism information through search engines, most of the results come from SM. A research conducted by Senders et al. (2013) concluded that customers enjoy building online relationships with tour operators through social networks. The results also indicated that people are increasingly comparing offers online with the aid of SM (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Parra-López et al. (2011) claimed that the main reason for the use of SM is that users perceive a lot of benefits. However, there are several factors affecting their use.



Significant factors that lead to the use of SM are the access to technology, individual predisposition, and user confidence in the information provided.

Furthermore, recent research stresses the shift from content search to social interaction and the evolution towards virtual communities and mobile platforms (Buhalis & Foerste, 2014; Nusair et al., 2012; Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Xiang et al., 2015).

### ***THE TOURISTS' PROFILE AND THEIR BEHAVIOUR IN EUROPE***

In general, a lot of studies have investigated the consumer behavior related to the use of SM. Hudson and Thal (2013) provided a literature review about the influence of SM in decision making process, emphasizing on tourism marketing inquiring the consumer behavior during the buying process and the role that business plays on it. Sotiriadis and Zyl (2013) explored the way the users of SM, in particular the users of Twitter from various European countries, make decisions about the buying process of tourism goods and services. Through this research, it was deduced that many tourism businesses use the Twitter platform to create a more personal contact with potential customers. Reliability plays a catalytic role in the use of tourist information from other tourists. In fact, the “online reviews” published at social networks seem to significantly affect the decision making process of potential customers. Kim and Tussyadiah (2013), in their study, focused on the relationship between the use of social networks, the social support, and tourism experience. The results showed that there are positive relations between them. Most tourists are engaged in social activities through social networks while traveling, so they can have social support and thus they have a complete tourist experience. Indeed, the fact that they make comments and share photos while traveling leads them to have a more enjoyable journey. Therefore, it seems that it is important for tourists

to be connected with SM. While publishing their travel stories, tourists who publish photographs and process information will gain more attention. On the other hand, those who read the others' posts about traveling are influenced regarding their own journeys (Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Tussyadiah et al., 2011).

SM tourism research associated with local communities and SM impact on local residents is still at an early stage, especially in Greece. The study of Bizirgianni and Dionysopoulou (2013) was a first effort to investigate the profile of young Greek tourists actively participating in SM, as well as the effects of information absorbed through SM on their travel decisions. Furthermore, the following two online researches have been conducted regarding the way that tourists act in social networking pages. Thus, the survey conducted by Stikkymedia.com (Santos, 2012) using information from the World Travel Market about SM and tourism businesses indicated that 85% of tourists use their smartphones when being abroad. Moreover, 72% publish photos from holidays and 46% do 'check in' through social networks. The most common uses of social networks when traveling abroad are the 'check in' process before the flight, searching for activities and attractions, and searching for restaurants. As regards consumer confidence, 92% of consumers trust almost all the suggestions and opinions of their friends. Another survey entitled "Techie traveler", which was published in the blog "Market Research the latest social media & market research news" (Lab42.com, 2012) aimed to reveal the ways in which SM have changed how people travel. So, it examined their habits before, during, and after the trip.

The use of SM extends from information searching to UGC, which is perceived as similar to recommendations provided by friends, family members or even "like-minded souls" (Ye et al., 2011; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). Murphy et al. (2010), based on their investigation of motivation to share online content by young travelers, suggested that young travelers would be more likely to publish their UGC on their own SM than on a commercial supplier/intermediary website. According to another research, people's attitudes,

motivations, and types of online social networks for posting their UGC are affected by their nationalities (Wilson et al., 2012). Prior research confirmed the role of personality of e-travelers in their behavior related to the use and creation of UGC. Thus, according to the study of Parra-López et al. (2012), the intentions to use SM are directly influenced by the perceived benefits of that use. Yoo and Gretzel (2011) found that travelers' personality constitutes an important determinant in motivating or inhibiting the creation of Web content by travelers.

### ***THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AT ALL STAGES OF TRAVELING***

Many social networks enable consumers to publish and share their opinions, write comments, and describe their personal traveling experiences, which then act as information sources for others (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Although the use and the impact of SM at different stages of traveling have been widely investigated in prior research approaches, the relative impact of each type of SM on travelers' decisions is not examined in the current literature. It seems that SM webpages are increasingly used by customers in order to obtain information about their journey. These sites can be used by customers throughout a journey, i.e. before, during, and after the trip. Previous research, related to the travelers' perspective, dealt with the pre-trip stage of the traveling process, especially with the information search (Leung et al., 2013). Consumers cannot only collect travel information from friends or relatives who directly belong to their social network, but also acquire more detailed information from online users worldwide.

Moreover, SM are more effective in equipping travelers with comprehensive knowledge on a tourism destination than other information sources (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011, 2012). As argued by Huang et al. (2010), obtaining travel information appeared to be the

primary motivation driving the travelers' use of UGC and SM. Trip characteristics seem to influence travelers' engagement with UGC for travel planning. Simms (2012) found that a higher percentage of travelers turned to UGC creators when visiting a destination for the first time, as well as when visiting an international destination. Noteworthy is that according to empirical research findings, the majority of Internet users are not using UGC for travel planning, so little is presently known about the relevant factors determining UGC usage for the specific purpose of travel planning (Ayeh et al., 2013). Fotis et al. (2012) conducted an empirical study among holiday travelers, residents of the Former Soviet Union Republics, in order to analyze the use of SM throughout a trip. This research led to the conclusion that SM are used during all stages of the traveling process, but to a different extent and for a different target, affecting users by choosing destinations for holidays. The content shared on online communities or blogs constitutes travel stories and experiences, which encourage audiences to visualize the consumption of tourist products and services (Tussyadiah et al., 2011). Leung et al. (2013) suggested that researchers and practitioners have to continually explore the antecedents and impact of SM on travelers, due to the rising popularity of SM in tourism and hospitality.

### ***TRUSTWORTHINESS OF ONLINE TRAVEL INFORMATION***

Several researches discussed the trustworthiness of UGC, mainly from the tourist perspective. According to Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), the trustworthiness of online travel information, especially UGC, is a very important issue. Munar and Jacobsen (2013) critically analyzed technological mediation through electronic word-of-mouth and factors related to virtual dissemination of travel narratives. To some extent, UGC is perceived as similar to recommendations provided by friends, family members, etc., thus becoming vital information source to potential tourists (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). It is considered as more trustworthy than information provided by the destination or tourism

service providers; it can subsequently be seen as substitute for word-of-mouth (Fotis et al., 2012). The credibility reposed in UGC will determine its influence upon tourists' decisions, as well as on their use of SM platforms. Yoo and Gretzel (2012) found that perceived expertise and trustworthiness of UGC creators were the significant predictors of trust in travel related UGC. There has been a debate whether or not UGC could be trusted. Generally, there are differences with regard to the level of trust in online travel information from different sources. In most cases, users are not sure whether they should trust comments made by travelers on weblogs and SM; however, they believe that UGC would be useful in the future. They feel that any concerns they may have in relation to legal and social problems resulting from its use will be resolved (Burgess et al., 2011). More focus is needed on the use and value of UGC for informing future tourism enterprise management strategic perspectives (Leung et al., 2013; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Businesses would benefit if they used SM in relationship management and improvement of products and services based on UGC.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Based on the aforementioned literature review, the following research hypotheses are formulated:

H1: SM are primarily used by travelers 2.0 before the trip (concerning the use of SM at the various stages of traveling).

H2: The reasons for which travelers 2.0 use SM are different, depending on the stage of the trip (before, during, and after the trip).

H3: The elements / services which are provided through SM webpages influence travelers 2.0 to a different extent.

H4: The higher the influence of SM on travelers 2.0 in order to choose a holiday destination or accommodation, the more likely is that changes will be made in holiday plans.

H5: Travelers 2.0 are uncertain about the trustworthiness of information provided through SM.

In the context of the methodological part of this paper, an online survey was conducted. The purpose of this survey was to investigate the impact of SM upon travelers, and more specifically travelers 2.0. The survey was entirely accomplished in Greece in a two-month period (October-November 2013). The participants in the survey were users of tourist services, who have the characteristics of traveler 2.0, as presented in Introduction. Facebook was the means of collection of responses to the online questionnaire. The distribution of the questionnaire took place through the following ways:

- sending the questionnaire as personal message to Facebook ‘friends’
- posting the link to groups of students of university departments in the city of Thessaloniki, Greece
- posting the questionnaire link to scout groups.

In that way, it was possible to gather a whole of 250 properly answered questionnaires; the initial sample was larger, but we selected only the units of the sample which corresponded to travelers 2.0. Some demographic data of the final sample are given below: regarding the gender, 44% of the respondents are male and 56% female. These rates are in consistency with the data of similar studies which indicate that women use SM at a higher rate compared to men. With regard to the age, the responses from each group (as determined in the questionnaire) were as follows: 12-18 years old (5%), 19-25 years old (62%), 26-35 years old (27%), and the remaining 6% of the sample belonged to the group of 36-60 years old. It is noted that, in general, the majority of people who use SM are between 19 and 35 years old; their percentage amounts to 89% of the total population of users. Consequently, the fact that the respondents in our sample belong mostly to the age groups of 19-25 and 26-35 years old is consistent with the global data mentioned above.

It should be noted that, in general, there are a lot of differences between SM in terms of the demographic data examined. For

instance, the users of LinkedIn are more educated (Bachelor's degree or postgraduate studies) than the users of other SM. This is why we will not proceed to a detailed presentation of the demographic data of the sample, since the purpose is to examine the impact of SM, as a whole, on travelers 2.0.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Travelers use SM in different time periods (or stages) of their trip. The three main stages of a trip are: (i) the preparation time, i.e. before the trip, (ii) the time that the trip lasts, i.e. during the trip, and (iii) a period (not so long) following the end of the trip, i.e. after the trip. According to the results of the survey, hypothesis H1 seems to be confirmed, since most of the respondents (66%) said that they use SM before the trip. During the trip, SM are used by 54% of the sample, and after the trip, they are used by an almost equal percentage (52%). One out of three travelers uses SM at all the stages of a trip (Figure 1).

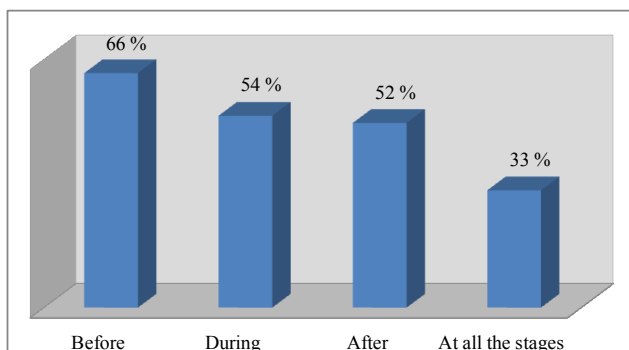
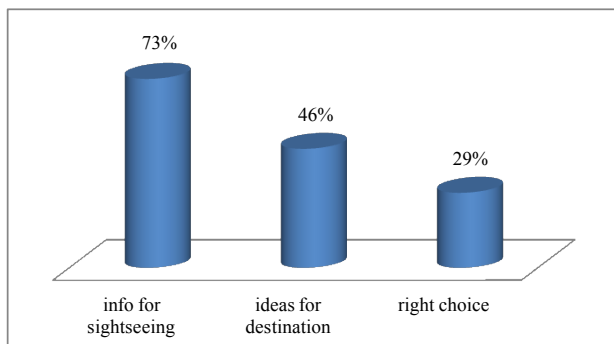


Figure 1. Use of social media at each stage of a trip

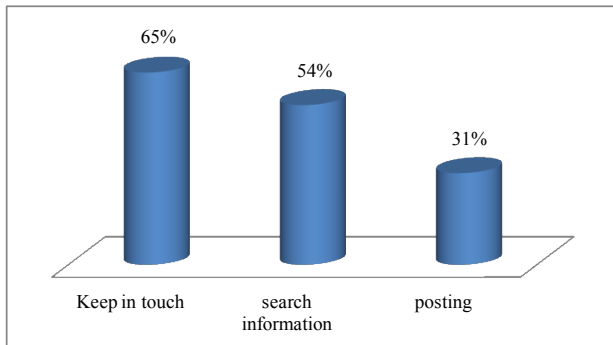
Regarding hypothesis H2, the reasons for which SM are used are quite different, depending on the stage of the trip. Before the trip, 73%

of the respondents use SM in order to find information about sightseeing, 46% use them to take ideas for an attractive destination, and finally, 29% do it to make sure that the right choice has been made. During the trip, 65% of the sample said that they use SM to keep in touch with their friends; 54% search information about activities that they could do at the place of destination; the third preferred choice during the trip is posting relevant material (31%). After the trip, the reason which distinguishes among the others is sharing experiences of the trip; 84% of the respondents said that they use SM after the trip for this specific reason. 32% use them to inform others who intend to make the same trip, while 16% said that they want to compare their experiences with those of other travelers. Therefore, the reasons for which travelers use SM seem to be actually depended upon the stage of the trip (Figure 2).

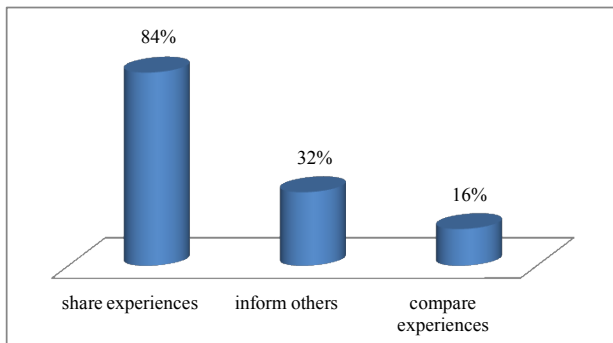


Before the trip





During the trip



After the trip

Figure 2. Reasons to use social media, depending on the stage of the trip

Travelers 2.0 are influenced by SM, since this is one of their major characteristics; however, the question that would be really interesting to be answered is about the elements of SM that influence travelers 2.0, as well as the extent they do so. This is what hypothesis H3 investigates. The possible replies out of which the respondents were asked to select were as follows: (i) photos, (ii) videos, (iii) comments by unknown users, (iv) friends' comments, (v) offers, (vi)

contests, (vii) other services. If we take into account both the replies of ‘a lot’ and ‘quite’, we can see in Figure 3 that photos receive a cumulative percentage of 63%, being the element of SM which most influences travelers 2.0. The comments by friends are in the second position, having a cumulative percentage of 60% for ‘a lot’ and ‘quite’. Offers, videos, and other services seem to influence at a lower rate, while the presence of contests in SM has the lowest rate of influence on travelers 2.0. It should be noted that, compared to comments by friends, the comments which come from unknown users seem to have a rather controversial acceptance.

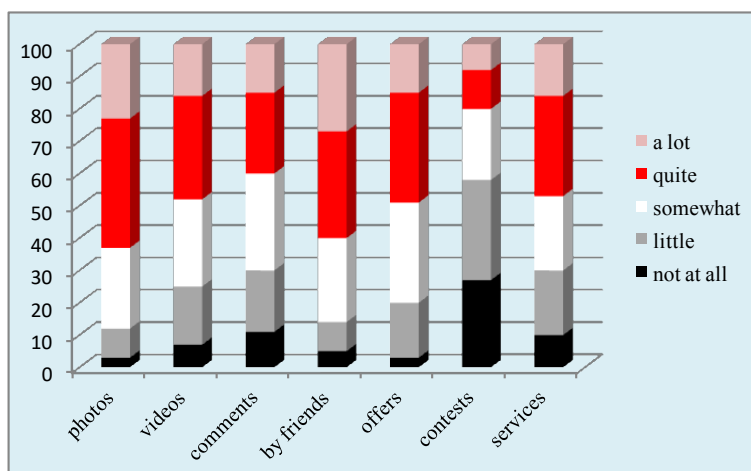


Figure 3. How the different elements / services provided through social media webpages influence travelers 2.0

In order to test hypothesis H4, we investigated whether there is a correlation at a significant level between the responses in the following two questions: (i) “Do SM influence your choice for a holiday destination or accommodation?” (a lot, quite, somewhat, little, not at all) and (ii) “What is the possibility to change your plans for a holiday destination or accommodation depending on the

information provided through SM?" (very high, high, moderate, low, very low). Both variables are qualitative, ordinal, so the appropriate correlation coefficient to be used is Spearman's. According to the result of the statistical test, Spearman's correlation coefficient was found to be equal to 0.57 at the 0.01 level of significance ( $p=0.006 < \alpha=0.01$ ), indicating that the two variables are positively correlated; thus, hypothesis H4 seems to be confirmed.

Hypothesis H5 concerns the matter of users' trust in the travel information provided through SM. According to the results, only 1% of the respondents trust the information provided at an absolute rate; 43% trust fairly the information, while a percentage of 52% feel worried about this kind of information. The rest of 4% do not trust the information at all. It can be deduced that, there is a lot of uncertainty about the trustworthiness of SM with regard to the quality of information provided through them; and this is apparent from the very low percentages of the two extreme replies of 'absolute trust' and 'no trust' (Figure 4).

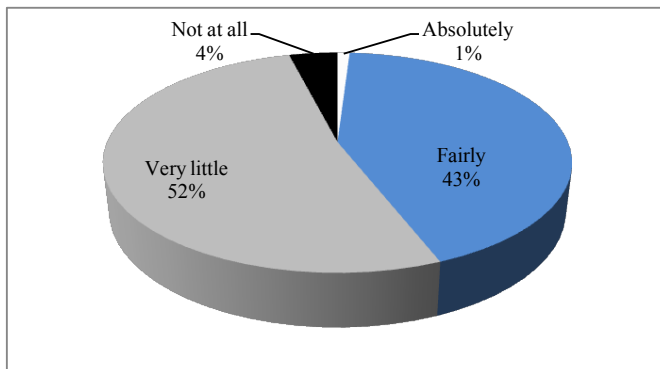


Figure 4. Level of trust in the travel information provided through social media

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the findings of our research, travelers 2.0 use SM at all the stages of their trip (before, during, and after the trip), but primarily before it; they use SM for different reasons at each stage of their trip. Travelers 2.0 are influenced by the various elements / services which are provided through SM, but to a different extent. It was also found that as much higher is the influence of SM on travelers 2.0, the more likely is to make changes in their holiday plans (concerning mostly the choice for a holiday destination or accommodation). However, at the same time that travelers 2.0 seem to be influenced by SM, they declare that they do not trust the information provided through them. This is a very important point, making us conclude that SM are significant information tools which are increasingly used by candidate tourists, but still they have not gained their confidence. Considering the above, the following conclusions are drawn about the behavior of users who employ SM for tourism services. Initially, it is observed that the Internet users spend several hours every day on the means, and in particular on SM taking advantage of the offered opportunities.

The most important part of the research refers to the relation of use of SM with the planning of the journey. It is characteristic that the majority of users employed SM in some of the stages of their journey, i.e. before, during, and after the trip. Indeed, the users exploited these opportunities to have a variety of information, such as attractions and destinations reviewed. This use of SM for tourism is entirely consistent with four of the examined surveys. It becomes clear that, in one way or another, users show a strong preference for SM to seek or to publish information on their journey.

Regarding trust, 95% hold a neutral attitude about the information provided. However, users trust much more the comments of their “friends”; this point was also confirmed by the research of Santos (2012). The research showed that users were affected by several issues and applications related to tourism. In particular, the posted comments and photos of friends play a key role in this influence. In contrast, the comments by unknown users are not the

main source of influence. The latter finding is in contrast with the studies of Kim and Tussyadiah (2013), and Santos (2012), which indicate that the others' comments are an important source of influence.

The Internet and SM have entered dynamically the lives of people. However, there is skepticism from users and up to a degree a failure of companies to meet the specific requirements of tourists. Thus, the tourism sector has to stress the benefits from the use of SM and should provide more opportunities and facilities to gain the full confidence of users. This research was an attempt to highlight the views and habits of travelers 2.0, and analyze how SM provide strong opportunities for the tourism sector. We believe that the research led to some useful conclusions and also revealed some points that need further investigation and analysis, since there are not many studies with relative content.

The survey accomplished for the purposes of this study took place in only one country using a sample with specific characteristics. This implies that the conclusions, which were drawn in this study, cannot be arbitrarily generalized but carefully studied in relation to the survey's setting. Additionally, they should be compared with the results of other studies, taking into consideration the similarities and differences regarding sampling process and attributes of the sample.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

One of our findings is that there is lack of absolute trust and confidence towards information provided through SM. A future study could investigate the reasons for which this attitude occurs; such findings might be useful for companies in order to learn the requirements of their potential customers and operate in such a way that would meet effectively these requirements.

Moreover, a research topic of great interest is the business perspective, i.e. how tourism enterprises set up pages on social

networks. There are a lot of issues that need to be thoroughly considered, such as: (i) the strategy development (if any) behind the design of pages on social networks, (ii) the factors that tourism enterprises should take into consideration for design and communication purposes, (iii) the good practices for SM marketing, and generally, the benefits from such a business endeavor. Tourism enterprises have started to experiment, to a greater or lesser extent, with SM and researchers should investigate how this novelty will influence their operation and their relationship with customers in the future.

An interesting future direction might also be the investigation of SM platforms that travelers mainly prefer. The preferences of users/travelers radically change and one should consider the reasons for which this happens. The analysis of new trends with respect to the popularity of these platforms, as well as the examination of disparities regarding their use, could contribute to a more thorough understanding of the impact of SM upon travelers.

Due to the progress of technology and the penetration of the Internet in every daily activity, tourism and ICTs should be increasingly combined in the next years, leading to the establishment and proliferation of the e-tourism industry. The pursuit of the determinant factors of e-tourism, as ICTs continue to evolve at incredibly fast pace, needs much further investigation. SM are indisputably a milestone in this evolution, so the analysis of their impact upon tourism and travelers should be further researched in forthcoming studies.

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